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THEY HUNTED A FOX

by

ALICE CAMPBELL

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THEY HUNTED A FOX

A **CRIME CLUB** *Novel*

A Crime Club Detective Story

IT was perhaps only a vague suspicion in the minds of one or two people that Tom Boldre, red-faced fox-hunting squire, had not died a natural death; a suspicion created by a crazy wager after a rowdy hunt ball that he would not ride a horse up a steep and slippery staircase. It seemed to Alison Young that one of the dishevelled party standing in the hall beneath had waited with cold purpose for the crash that never came, and later had tried again and this time made sure. *They Hunted a Fox* is told with Alice Campbell's customary skill and ingenuity.

By the Same Author

A DOOR CLOSED SOFTLY
KEEP AWAY FROM WATER
MURDER OF CAROLINE BUNDY
DEATH FRAMED IN SILVER
DESIRE TO KILL
CLICK OF THE GATE
FLYING BLIND

To
ERNEST THORNTON SMITH

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CHAPTER ONE

THAT first evening at Chenerys, what had Alison seen? Merely a conventional English dinner-table, bordered with frank, wholesome, out-of-door faces, glossy shirt-fronts alternating with expensive evening-gowns which somehow managed to look "county."

Even the thing that so shattered her at the grey edge of dawn had brought no warning of horror to come. A grim prank, but it had shocked none of the others. These people would have been puzzled by her reaction, putting it down to her being an outsider, an American, to her peculiar and vaguely suspect literary activities.

Effective and capable on her own ground in London, Alison had to admit that here in Gloucestershire she was a fish out of water. The meal preluding her first—and probably her last!—hunt ball was proving a definite ordeal. She looked longingly at Colin, seated far from her; he seemed to be making splendid progress with the toothy, raw-boned damsel on his right. His utter Englishness, his orthodox profession of medicine, passed him as correct. "Nice fella, Ladbroke," would be the verdict. She looked back to her host. Stranded like herself for conversation, Tom Boldre was signalling the butler to fill up her glass, and this at last gave her something to say.

"Please!" She waved the wine away. "I can't risk this, you know. Wynn should have warned you I'm the stupidest sort of person, a world's worker who's no good at parties."

Tom Boldre's jaw dropped. With comic dismay in his baby-blue eyes he turned a wary survey on her sleek sun-gilded head and backless bronze chiffon.

"You—you *work*?" His tone was hollow.

"Why, yes, I thought you knew. I'm in the London office of an American publisher—Boxall's; though I'm giving up my job next month when I marry Colin. It's through my work I met your sister-in-law. Surely Wynn told you I was the first person to read her book?"

Tom exploded. "Utter nonsense, Miss Young! Sheer bilge, that's what it is. Wynn thinking she can write a book! Or wanting to, there's the point."

"But a book about horses!"

"Humph! Why write about 'em? Ride 'em, I say. That's what they're for, eh, Fred?"

Alison's other neighbour, a chirpy, red-cheeked little man, snorted vehement approval. Tom's denunciation continued:

"Fancy stewing indoors, scribbling, when you might just as well be—be——"

"Doing something worth while?" prompted Alison, and was instantly ashamed, only to realise that no sarcasm could touch her host, whose naïve self-assurance, no less than his kindness, formed part of his charm. Easy to see why every one held him in such affection . . . and why Colin, since schooldays, had lost sight of him completely.

Wynn had noted the bland barb. Her eyes were dancing. Alison felt a brief envy for the girl who, although she had gone so far outside this closed circle of English county, could still fit into it, a hand into a glove. Wynn Marchmont, taking her part in the hunting talk which Alison found unintelligible; Wynn, the smartest woman here, though

half an hour ago her ancient white and silver brocade had lacked press-studs ; Wynn with eyes like purple-grey stars on a frosty night, slim, electric, owning nothing of fatigue ! Yet Alison knew she had been up at six that morning, taking her pupils riding in Richmond Park ; had packed a bag, jolted in a ramshackle car across England to Chenerys, and on top of that spent a solid hour pottering round the stables, just to please Tom.

But Wynn was home again, and loving it. Alison wondered how much of her sparkle was kindled by the lean, nut-brown man sitting directly opposite—Derek Boldre, Tom's younger brother. She also found herself comparing Derek's diffident, stoic quality with Tom's genial ease, and noticing again how the strangely light, tawny eyes lit at times with too mordant humour, at others with something less easily identified. There were parallel contrasts, she reflected, between Pat Boldre and her sister Wynn and between the two Boldre men. In each case the younger had the lean end, for while Wynn struggled along as poorly-paid assistant in a riding stables, Derek was trying to keep himself in a London veterinary practice. All the Boldre money was needed for Chenerys and for the widows of two intervening brothers killed in a 'plane crash in Kenya.

With a start Alison woke to the fact that Tom was speaking—had been speaking for several moments.

" Donkey in the paddock with her. Oh, yes, that'll soon calm her down ! "

Thank heaven, he was happily talking horses with the strident girl on his far side. Now, though, her own right-hand neighbour, Major Fitts, was addressing a question.

" See here, Miss Young, what's all this about Wynn Marchmont writin' a book ? "

"Oh, yes! It's a first-rate handbook for amateurs, on riding and the care of horses. My firm's bringing it out." (He needn't know this had been made possible only because Alison Young, recognising good material when she saw it, had rearranged and in places rewritten the manuscript Wynn had so shyly brought into Boxall's office.)

"Really!" Major Fitts screwed in his eyeglass. "You don't say! What's she likely to make by it, eh?"

Hardened though Alison was to brazen inquiries about authors' earnings, she was yet taken aback by the major's paralysing directness.

"Impossible to tell." She took refuge in the usual vague phrases. "Even with a well-known author, you know——"

"She's a good gal, Wynn," Fitts assured her. "She could do with a bit of the ready, I dare say." He drank his champagne.

Wynn could. That, Alison well knew, was why she had tackled writing in the first place, what had given her courage to walk into a publisher's office. It was blind chance, of course, that had brought her to Alison—and how curiously chance had continued to work! First the riding lessons Alison had taken in exchange for labouring with the manuscript; next Colin's coming to the stables one afternoon and meeting Wynn's vet friend, Derek Boldre. "This old school tie stuff," Alison had laughed to Wynn when their menfolk quickly claimed acquaintance—though to be sure Derek had been a small boy when Colin used to spend half-term holidays at Chenerys. Anyhow the encounter had led on to supper in Alison's flat—and by easy steps to this week-end invitation.

"They're in love." Alison had whispered it to

Colin while the two of them had prepared the scratch meal in her minute kitchen. "Can't you see it written all over them?"

She had felt then, and even more keenly believed it now, that the other couple's poverty and absence of prospects presented a grim obstacle in their path. Presumably it accounted for the lack of any formal engagement. How lucky she and Colin were to have their difficult time behind them!

Colin, too, had worn frayed collars and a skin-tight dress coat. Only five months ago, his practice unpaid for, he hadn't dared to propose, whereas hey, presto! Out of an adventure so shattering she still hated to think of it had come peace, utter bliss, and if not exactly plenty, then the signed and sealed promise of it.* Chance again. The chance that David Beddoes, Alison's cousin, should have taken a job in England; that he should have stumbled right off on Elizabeth, the girl by every man-made reason lost to him; chance that Alison's new friend was a doctor, chance that four people, three American, one English, should have got tangled up in quick-sands, horrible intrigue, knifings and shootings. . . . Gosh, had it really happened? It had—and as direct result of the publicity Colin Ladbroke was a rising physician, and A. Y., of Boxall's, had handed in her resignation.

Of course, Tom Boldre was always urging both his brother and his wife's sister to come and live at Chenerys. They just weren't the sponging kind. Looking at the magnums of champagne and at Pat Boldre's Lanvin gown, Alison was bitterly reminded of Wynn's shabby though handsome shoes, polished within an inch of their leather's life; of Derek's dingy digs in a North Kensington mews. But the

* See "A Door Closed Softly."

extravagance manifested at this dinner-party was only a drop in the Boldre bucket. It was the horses, Colin assured her, that cost people like the Boldres the best part of their incomes. Horses, it seemed, were always the last luxury to go.

Well, she believed that now. If any one at Chenerys had any other paramount interest than horseflesh Alison had yet to discover it. At the table to-night not another topic was being discussed, unless——?

Doubtingly she glanced at her hostess down at the far end. Arrogant, a trifle hard in her clean-cut good looks, Pat Boldre was turning a challenging eye on her right-hand neighbour. He was tall, fair, handsome in an even-featured way—and he seemed completely taken up with Pat. Both faces, typically English, had a schooled absence of expression. Except for the eyes. Disconcertingly Alison felt she had witnessed something meant to be hidden. These two people weren't talking about horses or hunting or . . .

In a lull Pat's words came to her: "I've got my eye on that gelding. It's just up to Tom!"

Alison could have blushed in shame—and relief. Again the talk surged round, Tom courteously including her although she was quite incapable of participating. Brood-mares, point-to-point, Newmarket sales . . .

A cheery voice cut across so suddenly that Alison jumped.

"I say, how's the wrist?"

No, Major Fitts wasn't speaking to her. Following his glance she noticed for the first time that Tom Boldre had a tight surgical strap round his right wrist, and that on each side the flesh, red and hairy, rose puffy with swelling.

CHAPTER TWO

THE major—he had sparse, oiled hairs just tarnished with grey and little twinkling, red-brown eyes—shouted again. This time Tom heard, and flicked negligently at his strap.

"That? Don't notice it." Back he plunged into his talk.

Major Fitts confided, "Nasty toss, smashed a couple of potty little bones. Won't stop him hunting to-morrow."

"To-morrow! You can't mean he'll hunt—with a broken wrist?"

"Lord, why not?" Amused, Alison's neighbour screwed a bright monocle into his eye and bored her with it. "Cracked collar-bone didn't hold him up," he chuckled. "He's got two wrists, hasn't he?"

"Well——!" She spread her hands. "You see, I'm marrying a doctor."

"Oh, so that's how it is?" He grinned indulgently. "Can't say I've much use for 'em myself. Oh, no offence, ha, ha! Why"—robustly—"what's a little twinge when a good run's on? Take me, the other day. Every symptom of 'flu, housekeeper fussing round with mustard-plasters, what-not. 'Whisky's my medicine,' I told her, 'and a regular shake-up.' Well! Proper lather I got into. Walked home in a drizzle to spare my hunter. Next morning, what? On my oats again, not a cough, not a sneeze."

Triumphantly he sipped port. His eye rolled suspiciously round.

"But you hunt, of course?"

"Not yet. Frankly. I'm petrified!"

"Tut, tut! Can't you stick on a horse?"

"Ask my riding-mistress."

"Who? Oh, Wynn Marchmont! You'll manage, right as rain."

He stared down the table at Wynn, then at Derek. Derek, Alison noticed, had lost his brooding air. Red flecks under his dark tan, a devil dancing in his eye, but as before all his attention bestowed on the girl facing him. . . .

At last the meal ended, and Alison went upstairs to her huge, comfortable bedroom. Colin strolled in to hurry her up.

"Powder my back, darling. Am I very shockingly naked?"

He held the swansdown well removed from his clothing and planted a kiss between her shoulder-blades.

"Let's not spoil the bloom."

"Angel! My teeth are chattering with fright. I must say, though, these people are perfectly sweet."

"Didn't I tell you? Best in the world."

"So genuine! So simple! I haven't the first thing in common with them, but it seems not to matter."

"Well——" his brows screwed. "Not for a week-end. All set?"

The pleasant, down-at-heel lounge had low lamps and a fire of fragrant, smouldering logs. Empty? Not quite. Two silent figures moved apart. They were Mrs. Boldre and her tall, blond partner at dinner. Off-hand almost to rudeness, Wynn's sister sauntered to a mirror and twitched a curl into place. Her companion, only a little self-conscious, offered his sliding gold cigarette-case, but did not speak,

flicking a used match into the base of a stiff, potted palm. (Yes, palms, of all impossible horrors—mingled with real Chippendale and damaged but valuable Queen Anne lacquer !)

Colin bridged an awkward silence by asking if they had far to go.

" What, Sompton Hall ? " Pat did not turn. " Oh, no distance. It's his place, you know." She jerked her head towards the blond man.

Of course ! His name was Kingsclere. His father, very rich and host for the hunt ball, was Master of Foxhounds. Stooping now, he had turned on the radio.

" . . . *a short fugue,*" droned an announcer, " *in Bach's later manner . . .*"

Flinching, Pat wheeled round. " Oh, God, do turn that off ! Hellish bore. Arthur, you swine, is that my ermine in the ash-tray ? "

" Sorry," murmured Kingsclere and laid the snowy wrap round her shoulders.

She shrugged, eyeing her sister and her two chattering neighbourhood guests who had just appeared on the stairs.

" Girls," she snapped, " but, of course, no men. Arthur, stir them up, will you ? "

There was no need. Out from the dining-room trooped the remaining males, rather like schoolboys, all three roaring with laughter. Tom was thumping Major Fitts' back. Derek met Wynn at the foot of the stairs, laid a possessive hand on her arm. She smiled, shook him off.

" How shall we go ? " she asked practically. " Joan can tuck in two. As Tom can't possibly drive——"

Tom bristled. " Oh ? I'll soon show you ! "

Tom was handing cigarettes. " Arthur "—to

Kingsclere—" are you looking after Pat? Right, then the rest are with me."

Moon riding between soft April clouds. A plume of wet lilac brushing Alison's nostrils as she stepped into the big car. Spring scent. Intoxicating!

Dim lanes, hairpin turns; evening smells, the dankness that was England. Now a cry from Major Fitts in the rear.

" Sompton Hall—and flood-lit, by Jove! Tom, that's run to something."

Alison, too, cried out at the enchantment suddenly burst on her out of the dark countryside. A shallow, smooth dale. In it a wide stone mansion bathed in moonlight radiance—every Tudor gable and cornice picked out in mother-of-pearl and grisaille. Brilliant tulip-beds, stung to colour; elms like fern-fronds in their new leafage, great cedars of Lebanon drawn in with Indian ink; a lake, with swans, reflecting the whole.

" Not bad," grunted Tom, recklessly shaving a massive lodge-gate.

" God, man!" yelled the major. " Why didn't you let me drive?"

Safely through, up to doors held open by servants in plum-coloured livery. Warmth and music gushing out; a bluff, grizzled host, six foot of cast-iron, putting the Londoners instantly at their ease. Alison's nervousness slipped from her. Her party spirits soared high. In a whirl of light and sound she danced with Colin, with Derek, with strangers.

Before the supper dance, she ran up to the gorgeous Stuart bedroom to refurbish. Coming away she spied the conservatory and, lured by its fragrance and Chinese lanterns, stepped inside. At once she saw she was not alone. Murmurs reached her from

the couple half-hidden behind pale-yellow freesias —a couple furled in a strangling embrace. As she tiptoed a retreat the woman's gown caught her eye. That heliotrope shimmer! And the man's head, sleekly honey-coloured . . .

Alison's chiffon sash had got tangled with a cactus. She tugged, hot all over, afraid of making her presence known. The low whispers continued.

"Pat, what the devil's come over you?"

"Nothing. Oh, Arthur, leave go!"

"So"—coolly—"you honestly believe you can stick it? After this?"

"I'm going to, and that's that!" Pat Boldre sounded sullen with strain—and stubborn. "Fool! It's Tom. How can I hurt him?"

"Someone's got to be hurt, old girl. Look, is it the mess you hate? Because——"

"Oh, don't nag me! Maybe. I don't know. Why argue? I'm telling you, this is finishing—now!"

"Quite." The man's tone was rough. "You're coming with me to-morrow—for good. Didn't we get that all straight?"

"No! I won't face it. Oh, I'll forget you, just you wait and see. Here, let's get back."

Violently Pat wrenched free. A rocking lantern showed Kingsclere's features, flushed, but set in cold, dogged fury. Their eyes crossed swords; Pat's did not waver. Kingsclere straightened, flicked powder from his coat, muttering something indistinct as Alison, getting her sash free at last, fled from the conservatory.

On the threshold she bumped into a poised figure.

"Wynn!" she gasped, but Wynn, eyes like steel points, was already racing downstairs. Catching her

up, Alison laughed. "Pair of anonymous love-birds in there. Didn't see me, thank God!"

"Don't suppose they'd have minded," came carelessly over Wynn's shoulder.

Neither fooled the other. Alison knew Wynn had heard, but that she accepted the lie with gratitude. They went in search of Colin and Derek for supper, and found them stuck with the two girls who had dined at Chenerys, and relieved to be claimed.

Wynn had gone gay again. In the jammed supper-room she stood, her white-sheathed slimness unwearied against a dark Mortlock tapestry, and juggled a plate of lobster salad. Derek hovered close.

"Enjoying the fleshpots?" he asked her lightly, yet with a curious grating intonation.

"Well, it's fun, isn't it?"

"You mean, it's what you really want?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you meant it, didn't you?"

His bitter, nagging tone infuriated Alison, and she felt fully in sympathy with Wynn's retort:

"Since you know what I mean better than I do myself there's really no point in answering that," with which she turned away from him and began talking fast and pointlessly to Colin and Alison.

Derek's face darkened till there seemed a tinge of green in his skin; he smote his thigh softly with clenched fist and cleared off to the bar.

The rest of the ball was confused, ending in something of a riot. Was it the drink? Certainly Alison had never seen the stuff put away in such staggering quantities. At the outset, the company had seemed formal, slightly stiff, but now——!

Well, nobody could accuse the gathering of suffering from constraint or the fabled British reserve. The band, who had also partaken liberally of liquid refreshment, were playing mad gallops, to which the dancers raced wildly up and down, shouting and yelling, "Yoicks!" "Tally ho!"—couples colliding with roars of laughter. There was romping and horseplay which had about it the roistering quality of frolics and revels of earlier, bolder times. Amid loud guffaws, the Master of Foxhounds led a mad steeplechase with sofas for obstacles. As Alison said afterwards, it was the vitality which paralysed one—that, and the ingenuous letting off of steam. Her opinion of the "County" had to be revised.

Four-thirty. The Chenerys' bedroom again—her legs aching, her eyes glazed with sleep. Colin kissed her at the door. For a second she clung to him.

"Undo my slippers, there's a dear. I just can't bend over."

Grumbling, he fidgeted with her glittering buckles. She fondled his hair, yawning, then scowled towards the uproar still coming up from the lounge.

"Idiots! Can you believe it? Still fresh."

"Or pickled. Here, don't wobble!"

"Just listen! Won't they ever go home?"

A few male intimates, pressed by Tom, had stopped in for a nightcap. Arthur Kingsclere was among them, and at thought of him Alison grew grave. She started to whisper her confidence, but stopped, arrested. What was that new, thudding sound half-drowned in still madder turmoil?

"Colin, something funny's going on. Let's see what it is."

"Oh, just one more lunatic rag!"

Ace no 8-911

He, too, headed for the balusters outside. Together they peered over into the well of light below.

"Oh!" She smothered her shriek.

Directly beneath was a fine, chestnut hunter with a white-starred forehead. On its back was Tom Boldre—and horse and rider were just mounting the stairs!

CHAPTER THREE

"OH, COLIN, those steps are like glass! His wrist. He's tight, and—not even a saddle . . ."

Colin pinioned her hand. She felt rather than saw the flushed and grinning faces grouped round the base of the stairs. Derek's, the little Major's, two boyish ones—and young Kingsclere's. A bad stumble.

"Stop him, Colin! Oh, do something, quick——"

A door banged against the wall. Across the landing behind swept a tornado of parrot-gay dressing-gown. Wynn gripped the balustrade and swore.

"Fools! And they all know he's never had a first-class seat. . . ."

"Wynn! Won't he listen to you?"

She did not answer. A hoof slid dangerously, those below howled with delight.

"Back!" It was gritted command. Then, "God and the angels couldn't stop him now. Just don't distract them. . . ."

The square turn—managed by luck, not skill. Tom's head topping the second rise—blunt features comically determined, sweat zigzagging a brick-red forehead.

"Easy does it, old girl!" That was Tom's voice, thickened but gentle.

Scratchily onwards. The horse in view, glossy flanks trembling, great veins criss-crossed between rolling brown eyes. . . .

A landing! Wynn seized the bridle and spoke briskly, as to a child.

"Well ridden, Tom! Off you get, let's walk her down."

"*Walk*?" The hero favoured her with an affronted stare. "I'm showing 'em—don't you get it? We're just half done." The horse towered above them.

"Bloody fool!" growled Colin, meaning it. "Get off!"

The mare, urged and yet held, tossed a distraught mane. Tom brushed muzzily at the obstructionists as though they were flies, they yielded in despair, and the descent was begun. Alison said to herself, "I mustn't look," but did look, all the same, eyes glued to the big hunter as it pawed and fumbled for the footing beneath. Clumsily yet with meticulous prudence it picked its downward way—a cat amidst bric-a-brac. Twice it slipped, twice recovered; reached the slippery turn again.

Alison forced her attention on the ring of upturned faces. The grins were frozen, there were no more shouts. It was the horrid moment when the orchestra becomes mute while the death-venture is performed. Even the faces had changed character. Could that be Derek's, perversely fascinated, the uprisen devil at the back of his light eyes? A stranger, inhuman. So was Major Fitts, callously intent—and Kingsclere, oddly detached . . .

"Oh, God! Oh, *don't*!"

She closed her eyes. Slithering below—a crash. Wynn's grip on her arm, hurting her flesh. That hollow thump. Sickness welled into her throat.

Thunderous yells. "By Christ, he's made it! Good man, Tom!"

Made it?

Unbelieving, she looked again. Hands were hammering her host's back. Liquid gurgled, someone

held out a dripping tumbler. Another picked up a fox's mask that had been knocked from the stair-post and tossed it high in the air. And then, from the bottom step, came Wynn's voice, like the crack of a whip.

"Look to the mare, can't you?"

It brought sudden, abashed sanity. Ready hands bundled a blanket over the shivering hunter, three men at once started leading her out, but Tom himself undertook it, first clumping to fetch sugar. Wynn waited, tense and grim.

"Derek," she ordered, "come here!" He came. "Who put him up to it?" she demanded, shaken with fury. "*Who?*"

"Hold hard. Why the fuss?"

"You heard me." She had fastened on to his lapels, her dark tousle of curls in a pent-house over eyes that stabbed. "Derek!" she whispered. "It wasn't you?"

His grin faded. One hand dealt with a crooked white tie, and what had seemed a small boy's guilt backed into a shell.

"That's a hell of a thing to say," muttered Derek coldly, and turned away.

She poised, looking after him, the thin, bright silk of her dressing-gown hugged close round a body thin as a reed. Then she stalked back to the upper dimness, starting a little to find her friends at the top. She shook back her tangle and laughed.

"I'm the fool," she declared shortly. "It wasn't as dangerous as it seemed. Horses take pretty good care of themselves, you know."

"Quite," said Colin, adding with tact, "This hour of morning's hardly the time to get a normal angle on things."

"Absolutely." Wynn squinted at her nails. "I think"—carelessly—"we'll not mention this to Pat." An awkward thought appeared to strike her. "Her room's in the far wing," she explained. "She couldn't possibly have heard. Well, good-night—or rather, good-morning."

She was gone, closing her door. Alison stood, dreaming on her feet. The next she knew, Colin had drawn her back into her quarters, caught up a face towel and was mopping his neck. So he'd been frightened too.

"There was danger, wasn't there?"

He cocked an ear to the decorous sounds of departure—clinking glass, the thud of the front door, cars whizzing home through the dawn. Now footsteps, passing here—heavy ones, then light. Funny, she thought, Derek hadn't looked tight, barring that contrary gleam which must have made Wynn long to hit him.

"Oh, I don't know," Colin answered. "It was a big risk for the horse. Wynn had that in mind, I dare say. A smashed leg, and——"

"They'd have had to shoot her? Yes; but were you watching Wynn's face? It wasn't only the horse, Colin, much as she loves horses. She adores Tom, you know. That's why . . ." She stopped, then undid a hook. "Well, anyhow, it was just the rottenest kind of prank. See here! Supposing—I say just supposing—one of that crowd had been hunting a nice, innocent way of polishing Tom Boldre off——?"

He tugged her short locks painfully. "Curb that thriller imagination! I know these sportsmen, you don't. Why, girl, you're stiff with cold! Here, hurry to bed." He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and made off.

Wynn, in her own room, lifted a curtain. In the jutting wing a window glowed palely through its covering of chintz. Tom, then, was still sleeping in his proper place. Was that better—or worse?

"Better. Oh, much! Pat, silly fool, will get this Arthur business out of her system. It would kill Tom if he knew, but so long as he doesn't——"

Pat was hard; and she valued her own comfort. Lazy, too, and underneath it all surprisingly conventional. Luxury-loving, though. Sompton Hall did hold advantages a person like Pat might appreciate, if only mud hadn't to be waded through first.

"Why are we so different, Pat and I? I suppose I'm just built for rough going, as she is for smooth. Not a thing one can change."

Nightgown torn. Oh, well, she wasn't really a slattern, only run off her legs. Dead-beat now—the sort of spiritual exhaustion that comes of setting one's jaw hard and keeping it set. To-night, cut loose for a spree, she and Derek between them had somehow managed to spoil things. Just irritation, born of interminable strain.

"And in God's name, why?"

Ah, that couldn't be laid at her door! Derek it was who wouldn't let her face double jobs—riding all day, cooking chops over a gas-ring at night in a cramped combined room. His care for her—or his pride? Whatever it was, no argument of hers could alter it. No, they'd just go on, year after weary year—till they were both too old, too fagged . . .

The jaw set again.

"I know it, so why grouse? If I've stuck it so far, I can go on sticking."

What she couldn't stick, though, was . . .

Back surged her shame. Oh, to have been able

to wash out those moments just now on the stairs! To have her mind clean as it had been before that wicked thought edged into it. The thought itself had turned tail and fled even as her eyes met Derek's. It was its having been there that made her loathe herself as something soiled, second-rate. Despicable.

CHAPTER FOUR

" Not Derek. Then who ? "

Muttering these words, Wynn opened her eyes on a sun-filled room. Over her hung Bessie, the only maid of long-standing, tea in one hand, riding-boots in the other.

" There's the hunt breakfast, Miss Wynn. I've left you as long as I could."

Wynn stretched. " Gosh, Bessie, I usedn't to be so fagged ! "

" No proper feeding, miss. Mr. Tom's always saying it."

" He would. What's the time ? Here, I must scram ! "

A tub, a swift, purposeful toilet ; running a wet comb through her tangle, wriggling into her black habit—rather loose for her now. There ! Much better. Clean-drawn, eyes clear under the restrained dampness of her curls, she clumped down to the lounge, to find Tom in worried conference with Gregg, his estate agent, a lean, yellowed man of discouraging smiles. Like Gregg, she thought, to come badgering Tom after a lurid night ! Though to be sure, Tom was nearly impossible to corner for business talks. Poor Tom, so primed for enjoyment in his fresh pink coat, his brow clearing pathetically at the promise of interruption.

Gregg said a polite, " 'Morning, Wynn, you're looking fit "—then coughed pointedly. Her pity embraced him. Gregg—himself the son of a stranded landowner—hated these sessions every bit as much as did her brother-in-law—put them off, she sus-

pected, till the last possible moment. She disregarded Tom's signals, whistled to the dogs, and crossed to the door.

On the shallow steps she paused, puffing cigarette smoke into the bright, thin air, while the five dogs scurried in circles. She must get them in again, every one. The wretched little Peke in particular was an incorrigible huntress, apt to hide and sneak off with the pack, making a nuisance with the hounds.

Lilacs again! Softly she repeated, "*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed*," and blushed. How Tom and Pat would stare if they heard her quoting poetry. Yet the second line followed, "*And the great star . . .*"

She had seen that star in the west last evening on the trudge back from the stables. Derek, too, had seen it, his face sharpening. This cursed vet practice! Suppose it never did pay?

Derek himself sauntered towards her, very smart in his ancient pink but again hag-ridden.

"Gregg's in there," she began. "Tom looks sick to the gills."

"I know." Derek ground his cigarette stump into the gravel. "I've told Tom he'll be the greatest fool not to close with that offer—the last, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Offer? For Chenerys? Why, who——"

"Haven't the foggiest, but Tom ought to snap it up."

"Think he won't?"

"Not he. Gregg's having a last try at talking sense into him, but I gather he's turning it down flat. Look at that for rack and ruin!"

Derek pointed to a gutter in crying need of repair. "More or less all in that state," he continued,

" barring the stables ; and no cash to redeem it. Tom can't run this show. He's snowed under with mortgages he'll never pay off."

Wistfully Wynn squinted up at the still-lovely Georgian house, rose-red walls freckled over with bronze lichen, run to seed, but gracious and serene amidst its smooth lawns and riotous shrubs.

" You'd get rid of it, I suppose ? "

" Like a shot ; but then I'm not sentimental. In other words, I lack the guts of my class."

" I do rather see how Tom feels about it," she mused. " And yet, with no children . . ."

" Duty to me," said Derek wryly. " Sheer rot, as I've told him, stubborn old donkey ! Why, Tom will out-live me by years ! "

Her face softened. How like Tom ! No head for business, spending with both hands what he hadn't got, yet firm as a rock on moral obligations. Derek was probably right. Tom had a magnificent constitution. Apart from accident . . .

Linking an arm through his, Wynn drew him along the drive.

" By the way, Derek, what did happen last night ? "

" Last night ? "

For a nasty moment she felt he was only pretending obtuseness.

" You know, Tom's little stunt. Who put him up to it ? "

Her casualness hadn't fooled him. The arm in hers stiffened.

" Why try to pin it on any one in particular ? " he asked. " You know as I do how every time Tom's been half-way tight he's offered to ride those stairs."

" Yes ; but was it done on a bet ? "

He shrugged. "I didn't see any money change hands." Evidently he wished the subject closed. Unwillingly he added, "I was out of the room. Came back to see Tom leading the mare in at the door. I objected, he shoved me aside and got on. After that it seemed a mug's game to interfere."

"Of course. Then you didn't notice if any one man was egging him on?"

"Tom didn't need to be egged. It was just a rag that started itself. None of us thought there was the least danger. I can't say we were in precisely reasoning form. Look, Wynn, aren't you making rather a song?"

"Am I? Sorry!" She hugged her relief, hating herself for it. "I only thought that all of you should have had better sense than to let Tom take that risk. Especially with his bunged-up grip."

"It looked different then, somehow."

"Well! Forgive me for lashing out as I did. I was upset, and——"

"Wash it out." He gave her arm a brief squeeze, dropped it. "I say, isn't it time we got over to Fitts' place for the breakfast? We're meeting in an hour, you know. I'd better rout out the others."

There was only a short stroll across meadows, for Fitts' boyhood home, to which the major had retired after Indian service, bordered the Chenerys domain. Very inviting it looked as the party approached it—an Elizabethan cottage, shut from the lane by neatly-squared hedges of yew. On the uneven bricked terrace the breakfast tables had been laid. They were bright with flowers and laden with food.

Between twenty and thirty guests were already falling to on the game pies, devilled kidneys and

great, succulent hams, the major, in his element, pumping hands, pressing those seated to larger helpings. There was coffee and tea, ale, hock and whisky; and Alison marvelled to find how many women as well as men indulged in the last. Incidentally, how much handsomer the feminine portion looked in their correct riding-habits! Each with a trim veil to anchor her topper and a hard, false bun firmly attached to the nape of her neck.

"Down from London?" growled a grizzled man at her side. Past middle age, untidily moustached, he was the local doctor. Alison wondered if he usually reeked like this at eleven in the morning, and if he abandoned his patients whenever it pleased him to take a day's hunting; but from the look of this company there wasn't much illness in Sompton. She started to talk with him and broke off, staring straight ahead towards a late-comer just approaching along a path edged in vivid blue lobelias and shaking his head, apparently at her.

As he came closer she recognized him—Tom's agent, whom she had met at tea the day before, a lugubrious sort of man, whose very smile had a doleful, defeated quality his well-bred nonchalance did its best to conceal. It had struck her when she was introduced that the load of worry Tom so blithely shook off must weigh overwhelmingly on this Mr. Gregg's shoulders; but why these odd negative signals—at her?

A voice barked in her ear, "What! Not joining us?"

Silly of her! It was to Major Fitts, in the act of heaping her plate with veal-and-ham pie, that the head-shakings were directed. The little man, quite purple in the face, was stumping round to greet his tardy guest and insist cholerically on his making

one of the party. Again Gregg shook his head, still with the same sad smile.

"Had my feed, Major. Work to do, no hunting to-day."

She noted then that Gregg alone was not in a pink coat, and that his legs in their drab breeches and leather gaiters looked dried and brittle, like his hollow-eyed face. As the major hospitably opened Bass for him, Wynn whispered, "Decent of Fred to include Gregg in his invitations. Tom's touched, don't you see?" Tom in actual fact was squirming guiltily and gulping whisky in great draughts.

Pat Boldre, fresh and handsome, was making a sturdy meal; calmly discussing weather prospects with Arthur Kingsclere, whose features no more than hers betrayed the least reminder of that scene in the conservatory. What two persons had heard might never have been.

"It did happen, though," thought Alison, remembering unpleasantly the bite in Kingsclere's voice when he had said, "*Someone's got to be hurt, old girl.*" It seemed worse to her now that the thing was so smoothed over.

At noon sharp the hunters led over by grooms were mounted and ridden to a shady cross-roads a quarter of a mile away. Wynn explained that the Sompton Hunt was a small, neighbourhood affair, rather unspoiled, and that Alison had met most of its members last night at the ball.

"That's the vicar." She nodded towards a russet-cheeked man on a decidedly restive horse. "And there," she murmured, "is our pet celebrity, Lady Horrocks."

Alison saw a ramrod image quite eighty years of age, with a glare that terrified.

"Double cataract," continued Wynn. "She's missed just two meets in ten years and can give most of us points on jumping. The boy on the pony's her great-grandson."

Every face, young and old, had the same look of untouched youth, though the skins of most were like well-seasoned leather. They even bore a queer family resemblance, like those of sailors or Orientals. Probably it came from the sharing of a life enthusiasm. Whatever the bond, it knit them together in a clan—hunting parson, impoverished squire, wealthy Master of Foxhounds, who, surrounded by servants, rode busily here and there issuing orders. She caught sight of the pack.

"Oh, Colin, the hounds!"

(Thank God she'd remembered not to call them dogs.) Out of a green lane they surged, in close formation—lean brown sausages lumped together; great lopping ears, soft, wistful eyes. . . .

A mellow, musical note. The horn! Oh, God, they were off!

She chattered, "Stick by me, Colin. If you desert me this day——"

"I won't," he grinned. Side by side, away they trotted.

Hours later she asked, "How am I doing?"

"Great," he told her. "Keep it up."

Entirely alone, the pack a metallic sound in the far distance, they drew rein on the crest of a rise and scanned the wide, empty landscape. Nice, this jogging along, just the two of them, drinking in the heady field odours, feasting their eyes on the snow-sprinkling of hawthorn.

"Would you say we were hunting?"

"Well—hardly. Not even, at the moment, among

those present, though we do seem to have caught up a bit. See that other straggler ? "

He waved his hand towards the figure of a scarlet-coated rider which, as she looked, flashed like a cardinal bird into a thicket of hawthorn over to the east.

" I strongly suspect," said Colin, " we've done a short cut. Keep it dark, for God's sake. We might have headed the fox and been down in the black list for ever. Timber below. Take it easy." He spurred on.

" You're telling me ! " She glanced at the dark huddle of trees through which they must pass to reach the farther open space. Then, suddenly, she shaded her near-sighted eyes. " Wait, Colin. Someone's down, just at the edge of that next field. See the red splash ? "

He looked. " Two red splashes," he corrected. " One bending over the other. And two horses." A pause. " I say, one's got a white star. That's Tom's. Here, let's shove on."

Deserted, Alison continued to strain her eyes. Though the victim of the toss had not stirred, his companion had left him to cross to the darker horse. That must mean Tom, or whoever the fallen one was, would be up in a moment. She rode on, downhill, over hillocky turf.

The copse, sunk in a hollow, was more extensive than it had appeared—awkward going, too, with its close-jammed trees and a central boggy patch. At last, without mishap, they emerged into the clearing. She uttered a cry.

" Why, Colin, they're still here ! "

There stood the pawing horses, starred chestnut and deep brown. Nearby on the stony ground lay Tom, motionless and with closed eyes, while over

him stooped the second huntsman, just wadding something into a pocket. The latter lifted his head, a queer, startled gleam in his eyes. A stronger shock of astonishment took her. It was Derek.

"What's wrong?" she quavered, feeling suddenly faint.

It had come over her in a blinding flash that Tom Boldre was dead.

CHAPTER FIVE

DEREK moistened dry lips.

"Didn't see it happen. Expect he tried to rush that wall just ahead—mistake, with these loose stones. Has he broken anything?"

Colin was off and bending down. "Only a simple knock-out, I think," he gave verdict. "Possibly a very mild concussion. Can we get help?"

Alison exclaimed, "Here's someone now!"

Mysteriously, from the edge of the wood, a man had materialized, and was coming towards them. He was youngish, clad in stained cords, and he spoke in a soft, curiously-refined West Country drawl.

"Mr. Boldre's been unlucky again, has he?"

"Oh, Glover," said Derek curtly, "what we want is a gate. Isn't there one up there?"

"Right, sir, we'll get him along to my place. My wife will telephone to Chenerys from the vicar's. I'll fetch the gate."

It was Derek, however, who set off at an impatient jog-trot, the new-comer lingering to squint down at Tom's red, unconscious face. His own face was pale and entirely blank, only his jaws moving rhythmically as they chewed on a straw.

Colin hailed, "Derek, old man, you cut along. We'll see to Tom."

Derek turned, clearly tempted. "No, blast it! You're guests."

"Rot! I'm a doctor, not you; and frankly we've had our fill. Look, he's just coming round."

"Darned decent of you. Thanks."

Glover had moved off. Near the pawing horses he stooped a moment only to straighten again and walk lazily towards the gate. Derek swung into his saddle, withdrew for a suitable take-off, and at a moderate pace made for the wall, taking the jump in effortless fashion, his brown gelding rising at just the right instant and skimming over like a bird. Away thudded the hooves over the ploughed field beyond, and in less than a minute horse and rider had melted into a bank of white hawthorn.

"Who's that?" asked Tom thickly.

"Derek. Here, lie down."

Tom's calm brow puckered, his lips muttered blasphemy, and he fainted again when they eased him on to the gate. A farm-lad who had come up clambered astride Tom's mare to ride her to shelter, and the cortège toiled slowly up the slope to a picturesque, dilapidated house half-hidden in ragged fruit-trees.

"Then he really is all right?" asked Alison, still in the grip of her fright.

She glanced at Tom, laid now on a rude four-post bed with a green coverlet over him. As Colin nodded she picked up the cup of hot tea hospitably prepared for her and drank it in thirsty gulps. How dry she had been! And it was well after four o'clock. She could not have believed it. They left the invalid and explored into the old, beamed kitchen.

"Silly of me," she whispered, "after last night. I ought to know now that nothing bad does happen to these people."

"Oh, they're used to tumbles! My job will be sitting on him till I'm sure about that head of his. Is this the woman coming back from her telephoning?"

A rather bewitching dark slattern, slim as a boy, leant her bicycle against the door-jamb, spied Colin and smirked engagingly.

"They're sending a car," she announced in a soft, pleasant sing-song, and smoothed her soiled green jumper down over her narrow hips. "Where's that man of mine got to?" She peeped into the bedroom. "Oh, I see, he's minding Mr. Boldre."

They all moved to the doorway. The farmer, who was examining Tom's right wrist with curious absorption, smiled at them, drew down the disarranged cuff, and tiptoed out.

"All that swelling, no wonder he had trouble," he remarked, and paused contemplatively. "Not," he added, "but what he does seem to get these little mishaps pretty frequently. Till I saw that wrist——" He stopped again.

"What?" prompted Colin.

"Well!" Glover closed the door cautiously and sank his voice still lower. "It did just occur to me one of his crowd might have ridden up on him and caused the accident. Not meaning to, you understand. It's been known to happen," he said judicially.

"A nasty trick like that? Not, I should imagine, with experienced huntsmen."

"No, not likely. Oh, no!" repeated Glover, but stood rubbing his long chin.

His wife's green eyes were on him. To Colin she said, "Sure it wouldn't be better if we got him over to the Cottage Hospital?"

"No, indeed," declared Colin decidedly. "It was only a bad whack." Touching a faded pink coat which dangled rough-dry from a clothes-line, he asked Glover if he hunted.

"When I can," answered the farmer. "But I've

only the one mount and she's on the sick list. Meg ! Can't you rustle along some bacon and eggs ? "

Alison protested that the tea was all they wanted. " I'm admiring this wonderful old farm-house," she went on. " What a beautiful, huge chimney-place ! " She peered into an immense iron cauldron hung from chains. It was filled, alas, with rubbish.

" Just you try living here," pouted Mrs. Glover. " No joke, I can tell you. I'm used to town."

Not, certainly, to housework. The sink was piled with greasy dishes, the books stacked in every corner were thick with dust. Alison examined some of the reading matter. Among a number of worth-while books she noticed a vast jumble of magazines —mostly *The Reader's Digest.*

" All George's," giggled the woman. " He won't let me tidy 'em, or clear a single one away. Hark, that sounds like a kill." She moved towards the rear door and looked out, over the green hills. Somewhere, not far off, an hysterical clamour had broken forth. Snarls and shrill yappings told of a pack run amuck. " Hogarth's Dip, that'll be," she declared. " So your people will be home in short order. And look you, here comes the car."

Glover, again vanished, was discovered back at the bedside, gazing down thoughtfully at Tom, who was fidgeting with some restlessness and throwing off wet towels. When the car drove off the husband and wife stood watching its departure with smiling faces ; but Alison, waving back, fancied the smiles were a bit absent, even that her turning had interrupted some confidence between the couple. The man's arm had gone round the woman's waist with a silencing pressure, but she thought little of it at the time.

Tom, in his own bed, grumbled viciously.

"Season ending any day! Why the hell couldn't you have left me alone? Oh, that sounds ungrateful, but see here, I'd have been on again in two ticks."

"Sez you! Instead of which," snapped Colin, "I'm going to see you lie doggo for a good twelve hours. Man, don't you realize you've been concussed? Your sister-in-law's backing me up, so pipe down."

Pat, tramping in, raised sceptical brows. "Rotten for you two, missing all the fun," said she briefly, and disappeared for her bath. Soon the room overflowed with visitors, sympathetic but slightly surprised by the precautionary measures. As Colin said afterwards, it was a scene which might have come straight from the pages of Surtees.

"Bad show!" Major Fitts nursed his whisky glass. "On Glover's ground, you say? Yes, stony bit, that. And Derek found you?"

"Derek found me. Funny thing," mused Tom, "I thought it would be you."

"Oh, I was ahead of you. I saw you get bogged by the water-mill and took warning, so I skirted that patch and gained quite a lead. Derek had trouble there, too, I fancy?"

Derek answered for himself. "Yes, but it wasn't the only time. I got held up with girths, and again in that damned marshy timber." He was burnt Indian red and he walked with some stiffness. "No, the Boldre brothers didn't make a good showing to-day—one groggy, the other out of practice."

"Arthur, you and Pat seemed to be leading from start to finish," remarked Wynn. Perched on the foot of the bed, she was combing knots out of her curls. Kingsclere smiled, sipped his drink, and said nothing, while the others ran on, rehashing experiences. The atmosphere grew thick with smoke,

Tom's face in the midst of it red as a tomato. Colin asserted his authority and gave the order to clear out and let the patient quiet down.

"What the hell!" muttered Tom; but his friends, though mildly amused, beat a courteous retreat. He caught at Wynn's sleeve. "Sing to me," he begged, like a child of six. "You know what."

She pulled a face at him but slipped obediently into the adjoining room—the old nursery, she explained to Alison, who followed. Down she plumped before a tinny old piano, slapping on the rack a piece of battered sheet-music.

"Tom's favourite song," she whispered. "For God's sake, don't explode!"

The ballad, many-versed and of sugary sentiment, was entitled "The Place Where the Old Horse Died."

"Close your ears," Wynn warned, "I'm going to screech."

When they peeped in on Tom after the performance, he lay placidly slumbering.

He was strong as a cart-horse, of course, and next day his accident was forgotten. On the Monday morning he even quite seriously suggested driving Alison and Colin to the train himself.

"Just to show myself in the town and save my tumble from being written up in the local rag."

But it was in *The Times*, less than three weeks later, that Alison and Colin read shocking news of their friend. Thrown again in the hunting field, Tom Boldre had been picked up with a fractured thigh, and died soon after they got him home.

CHAPTER SIX

THE two travellers were midway their journey before the compartment emptied, leaving them alone. Now, for the first time, Wynn spoke.

"How could it have happened?" asked she huskily.

Derek shook his head. His face looked leaner, and in some strange way even his stature seemed to have dwindled.

"Just pegged out, all at once. After they'd got him home."

Wynn knew this. She also knew that it had been Arthur Kingsclere who stopped to investigate after a dozen others had galloped on. That damned wrist! Never given a chance to get strong.

Furtively she dabbed at her eyes. Startlingly grey they were in the pinched pallor of her face.

"Yes; but when you think of the ugly smashes he's had . . . Derek! Did you know he'd a weak heart?"

"Never heard of it."

Talk died. When it was dusk Derek moved over beside Wynn, hesitated, then slid an arm round her body. She buried her rumpled crop in his shoulder, and so, in silence, they remained. Many times they had sat thus, but always a rocky obstacle had interposed itself between them. Now it was gone the sudden absence brought a feeling of guilt.

Odd, thought Wynn, that there had never been any one else but Derek. She could have had six men, all better endowed, and not only in a worldly way. Derek, too—what had stopped him marrying

some well-to-do young woman of the neighbourhood ? Just this same stupid singleness of heart, be it blessing or curse. Fate, perhaps. Just fate which had kept both of them unsatisfied, miserable, yet bound. But was it also fate that vital, iron-muscled Tom should snuff out like a candle ?

" Cold ? "

Derek hauled his shabby Burberry from the rack and wrapped it round her suddenly-shivering form.

Had she fallen into a dose ? Here they were at Bewkesbury, door banging back and Freddie Fitts' friendly eyes, minus their twinkle, peering in on her dishevelment. Out she stumbled, clutching her hat.

" Bad business ! " The Major solemnly grasped her hand. " Shocking jar for the lot of us. H-h-r-rumph ! "

He trumpeted on his nose.

Derek had most definitely changed. In what way ?

From the front steps of Chenerys, Wynn watched him setting off on a tour of his new property. Barely three days ; funeral only yesterday, and a dreadful flatness still making it impossible to resume ordinary life, and yet . . . What was it ? Derek seemed firmer, more braced. Better equipped for strain.

She hadn't expected it. Through her very passion for honesty she must somehow have miscalculated his character. He was getting—" No, not more like Tom. That's not it at all. He's taking command, as poor, sweet Tom never was able to do."

He'd sell the place, of course. That was a foregone conclusion. Pat had her separate provision, as had the other two widows, both living abroad, so the sale of Chenerys would not affect her. No doubt

when debts had been cleared a tiny bit of capital would remain, enough, possibly, to——

"Wynn! Do come in! I've something to say."

It was her sister, petulant, imperious. Chafing, now her first sodden weeping was over, against a moment's solitude. Poor girl, if only she had felt it decent to get on a horse and go for a gallop!

Wynn turned back into the lounge. "Yes, what is it?"

"Oh, you know!" Pat tapped a cigarette irritably against her palm. "I'll go crackers here in this house with just you and Derek. Can't we get someone down?"

"Why not? Any one you like."

"I like!" Peevishly Pat spread her hands. "You seem to forget it's not my place any more."

"Bilge," said Wynn shortly. "You talk as if it were mine."

"Well, isn't it?" Cool, handsome in her expensive black angora frock, Pat stared back at her sister. "You and Derek'll be getting married any day now. And about time, I'd say."

Wynn flamed to the roots of her hair. Her tone, though, was ice-cold as she demanded, "And just what is it you're trying to suggest?"

"Well! I've eyes, haven't I? Do you mean to stand there and tell me you and Derek haven't been living together all this while? You have. Isn't it so?"

Wynn tightened her grip. So soon after Tom's burial! Surely her brother-in-law's kind presence still lingered, would be hurt by this squabbling.

"No," said she evenly. "It happens not to be true."

"Oh! Then the more fools you. With every one thinking how convenient this is, making a way for

you and Derek to . . . why, they all see how you two feel about one another! Even poor old Tom——"

"Tom. And you. Who else?"

Pat shrugged. "Well, then, Fred Fitts. Asked me, last time you were down here together, when you were meaning to tie up. Oh, Fred notices!" She fidgeted to the hearth, faced round accusingly. "And incidentally it was he who told me about Tom's risking his life on those stairs the night of the hunt ball. The rest of you kept it dark for some reason."

"And did Fred," said Wynn dryly, "tell you Arthur was cheering Tom on with the rest?"

That got her. Or did it? You never could know with Pat. For a split second the sisters confronted each other; and then, even as Wynn quailed to think what bomb anger had made her hurl, Pat snorted contemptuously and brushed the whole thing aside.

"Do stick to the point, Wynn. I don't feel like having any one *close*, if you understand. To visit here, I mean. Why can't you invite one of your London friends? That American girl might jump at the chance of a fortnight's riding."

"Alison Young? She's got a job, and anyway she's getting married soon and she wouldn't want to leave Colin."

"Well, you can find out, can't you? Get on to her now."

What Pat wanted was a buffer, thought the younger girl a little grimly as she went through into the seldom used office. A totally impersonal wedge between herself and her own awkward reflections. . . .

Derek was looking in at one of the horse-boxes when Gregg appeared mournfully beside him.

Neither found anything to say. Then, "I'll get rid of this tubed mare," Derek murmured mechanically. "No earthly use keeping her. Why she was ever bought . . ."

The agent smiled, his eyes hollow and sad. "Hardly worth bothering now, is it? If the lot of it's to go."

The new owner stiffened very slightly. "Oh? Not so fast. I've some tall thinking ahead."

The jaundiced glance flickered with surprise. Gregg seemed taken aback.

"I see." A polite pause. "Well, any time you say I'll shunt along all the figures. From what you've always said, I rather concluded——"

"Don't conclude, old man. I'll do all of that." Derek laid his hand for a second on his companion's shoulder, then passed on to the other boxes. "A deal of cutting down can be done right now," he remarked to himself. "All these good acres, just given over to grazing. . . . If the whole show was reorganized, then what?"

Hypnotized, Gregg stared after him. "Like me to come round with you?" he asked tentatively.

"What? Oh, not now. Just having a look-see."

The agent remained where he was, rubbing a dry palm slowly over his emaciated thigh. His eyes held a queer, almost a cheated expression.

It had been raining in buckets. The lilac by Major Fitts' back gate hung in brown, sodden clusters which deluged Derek with cold drops as he shouldered his way through. Rounding the bricked terrace he beheld the major himself by a wide-open casement window, seated at a table and energetically cleaning his guns.

"Don't get up," said the younger man. "I'll come this way." Hoisting his legs over the sill,

he joined Fitts in the small study, more strictly speaking a gun-room. "Shining up the armoury, are you?"

The major had hopped spryly up to drag forward a second wheel-backed chair.

"Something to occupy me," he explained. "Since that—that churchyard bit I'm all fidgets, you know." He blew his nose, depositing an oily smudge on his chin. Gruffly he continued, "What's the good, though, eh, old man? Got to keep in the saddle, however we may feel. Here, have a spot." Tilting a decanter, he poured till a gesture checked him.

The visitor seemed seeking remarks. "Used that in India, I suppose?" He indicated the heavy Colt's revolver Fitts had taken up and was vigorously polishing.

"What? Oh, this fellow! Quite. No good to me now. Keep it loaded, just for luck. No, it's clean as a whistle." Absently the major picked shells from a grey carton and clicked them into the chambers. "Supposing I did want to blow daylight through a burglar, this'd be the lad to do it, eh, what?"

Derek hefted the weapon, laid it aside. He opened his lips, eyed the clock on the wall, and about to speak altered his intention. A step had approached along the terrace, and now Arthur Kingsclere, in plus-fours and a shabby jacket, leant elbows on the sill. Again Fitts bobbed up.

"Come in, come in!"

"No, not now." Kingsclere's ruddy skin showed lines about the eyes, as from lack of sleep; the eyes themselves were the pale, cold blue of a February sky. With obvious effort he said, "Still after that filly? Just wanted to know."

"Filly? Oh, to be sure! M-m-m . . . no, I think not. It was only a whim."

"Right, then Stafford's taking her. May I borrow a light?"

The hand grasping the matchbox was none too steady. Derek, examining the face lit by the flare, caught a returning glance and removed his own.

The telephone rang; the major, summoned by his housekeeper, went to take the call. While he was gone the two men, separated by the window-frame, made forced conversation with no reference to Tom, and showed relief when interrupted. At once Kingsclere took his leave. The major seemed scarcely aware he was no longer with them till the whirr of a car engine jarred him awake.

"By gad!"—in annoyance. "He's pushing into Bewkesbury, I'll wager. Why didn't I ask him to collect my Stores' parcel from the goods office? I've a school meeting at seven." Absent again, Fitts replaced the top of the oilcan, sighed profoundly and jerked himself up. "By the way," said he, mopping a warm brow. "Tom was pretty frank with me about—ahem!—finances. If an odd hundred or so would come in handy just now, I—I'd like to let you have it. No interest, of course."

"Thanks, Major." A dingy flush spread upwards from Derek's collar. "Tom would have appreciated this no end; and so do I, obviously." He hesitated. "Don't think I'll take it, all the same. I want, if it's possible, to keep clear of new debts."

"Well, here it is if and when you should want it. Putting the place on the market?"

Derek took a long time to reply. As at Gregg's suggestion his lips hardened combatively.

"Since this has happened, I'm less sure. I must

go into it all very carefully. After all, I was born here."

The bright eyes sent him a glance, shrewd, kindly, but dubious. Fitts blew his nose.

"Quite! Most natural. Well, here's luck!"

Draining his glass, the major took a peek at his watch. Derek, his own eyes once more on the time, got to his feet.

"I'm going to Bewkesbury, Major, as soon as I can get out my car. Shall I pick up that parcel of yours and drop it here on my way back?"

"Will you, by Jove? I'd be damned grateful."

Derek took the claim ticket handed him and vaulted to the terrace.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY had reined in bedside the squat Norman church. With a catch at her heart Alison saw the low mound that was Tom Boldre's grave, its covering of forget-me-nots grey in the shadow of early morning.

" If I've said so little——" she began, and could not go on.

" What," muttered Wynn, " can one say ? "

Hunting, she explained as they cantered homeward to breakfast, had continued longer this year because of the cold snap. The day Tom crashed fox-bitches had been seen running round with pups.

" I suppose, though, it would have happened all the same. There's bigger risk, you know, with point-to-point."

Wynn seemed to have slipped back into a familiar groove. Even her tweeds had taken on a country look. Though subdued, she had a fresher colour and a bearing less taut. Alison told her she had brought down the proof-sheets of her book.

" Oh ? Well, we can go through them some time. All that seems so far away now. It was good of you to come right off like this. I'm busy helping Derek, who's up to his eyes trying to straighten out the muddle, and Pat—well, at a time like this she's sunk. I imagine Colin's worked to death with all this 'flu ? "

" He didn't want me to catch it ; and besides, he hardly gets a glimpse of me just now. Otherwise I'd have had to say no. Oh, but this country is lovely ! " Alison drank in the keen, bright air.

"Derek wanted it too," said Wynn, and bit her lip. Hardily she added, "He does look different, don't you think?"

Yes, Derek was suddenly more alive, even though he was withdrawn and preoccupied, burdened no doubt with his new responsibilities. Pat she found much her usual self, stolid, composed. Arthur Kingsclere had come in during the evening, and he, too, was casual and reticent.

"Here!" Alison pointed with her crop. "Isn't that the field where Tom had his other accident? It is. I hadn't realized it was so close to Chenerys."

They were midway the lane which formed the little used connection between the Boldre estate and the main road to Bewkesbury. From the cross-roads near the church and Sompton village to this point ran a low stone wall, but now began the high hedges she remembered. They were planted on ancient earth-works—a thick tangle of dog-rose and blackberry, spiked here and there with a tall, thrusting foxglove. On the right there was a single break. It was a gap two feet wide, and through it ran a trickle of water to flow away in the ditch.

"I thought then about Tom's heart," Alison went on. "And I believe Derek had the same idea. Because, you know, he was looking so startled. Only Colin said afterwards——"

She had pulled up abruptly. In one horrid instant her whole empty interior turned over.

"Look!" she gasped. "Oh, don't you see?"

Wynn turned her head. On the higher level, a little back from the break in the hedge, a pair of patched soles confronted them. They belonged to a man, prone and dreadfully still—a man whose brains had oozed from a great void in his forehead,

whose blood, dark and congealed, had collected round him in a small, muddy pool.

"Good God! He's been shot—through the neck, and through the head."

It was the grey, oozing stuff that made the sight so nauseating; that and the shattered, upturned face, to say nothing of the flies crawling in the mess. From the waist down the body was soaked in running water.

Wynn slid from her horse. "I'd better look into this, I suppose," she muttered.

Alison clutched at her. "Don't! That is——" She was recovering a little. "Just the other evening I heard a pal of Colin's, he's a Scotland Yard inspector, saying how one must never interfere with clues."

"Clues? But this isn't murder. It's accident, of course. Or suicide. Some poor fool of a farmer——"

"Then where is the weapon?"

"That's so, I don't see it. Under him, I expect. Maybe you're right, and I certainly don't want to touch him. Let's hurry home and telephone the police."

Cool again, Wynn started to remount, but stopped, her foot in the stirrup. Behind the hedge sounded a patter of light, stumbling steps.

"*George!*" rose a woman's scream. "*George!*"

In the opening appeared a slim figure clad in an olive-green, soiled jumper—a figure with a mass of black, badly-crimped hair and greenish eyes which Alison recognized.

"George!" burst from her again in a whimpering sob.

She fell on her knees beside the sodden, lifeless body.

Alison clutched the receiver.

"Glover," she hissed. "Murdered—don't you hear me? We found him just now."

"Glover." A phlegmatic pause. "Sorry, I'm chewing a kipper. Well, who's Glover? Someone we met at the ball?"

"George Glover, you poor mutt! Surely you remember the farmer man who helped us with Tom? Shot dead in the night. Been lying in slimy mud for hours. Oh, loathsome!"

"Oh?"

She could have shaken him. "Gosh, can't you scare up just a little excitement? You damned Britishers! You're all the same, unless it's someone of your own class." She glanced behind guiltily. Yes, she had closed the office door. "Here we've got a real murder mystery right on our doorstep, so to speak, and can I get a rise out of any one?"

"What do you want me to do, turn cartwheels, cough up my tea?"

"Oh, drink your tea! Drown yourself in it and see if I care!"

Down slammed the instrument. She went back to the lounge.

Arthur Kingsclere was there, his riding-boots spattered with mud. He and the two sisters were calmly discussing some matter quite unrelated to the murder. She asked him if there was any more news.

"News?" His manner showed faint surprise.

She felt suddenly embarrassed. "Well," she faltered, "Wynn happened to mention that your father is a magistrate. I thought possibly you might have heard something about that body we found."

"Oh, the shooting affair! No, not a thing."

Kingsclere turned back coolly to the others, but the thread of previous discourse seemed broken. "Stafford's laid up with lumbago," he said carelessly, throwing the remark into air. "Appears he's already made up his mind no local person did this, and swearing the yokels down here couldn't solve a child's crossword puzzle without him to direct them. Here's those papers." He tossed a batch of illustrated weeklies into Pat's lap and strolled out to his horse.

"Who is Stafford?" asked Alison.

"Chief Constable." Wynn stifled a yawn. "Between ourselves he'll make the most of his lumbago."

No, no real interest. Perhaps it was bad taste to display so much curiosity, but in spite of this Alison pressed on. Who were these Glovers?

"The Glovers?" Wynn forced attention and picked up her knitting. "Tom's tenants. Derek's now. Not been here very long. Border people. I'd call her Welsh."

"So that's her funny accent. What are they like?"

"Not too reliable, I'm told. Rather unpopular; and the wife's a bit fly, so Bessie informs me. Derek didn't finish his breakfast, did he? Back at the stables, I expect."

"Skirts are definitely shorter," remarked Pat from the pages of *The Bystander*. "All my things are wrong."

They were only taking the rational view. Alison, as she went to her bedroom for the proofs she had promised to read, felt ashamed that her own nerves should still be so shaky and that her inquisitiveness should leave her no peace. She thought again of George Glover. Pleasant, but just a bit smarmy?

The woman, too, ingratiating, sending coy glances at Colin. No, she hadn't liked either overmuch. All the same, the man had been alive, only three weeks ago making tea for them, showing sympathetic concern for his landlord; and now he lay on the cold slab of a mortuary, his face blown to ruin. . . .

The morning was cool. Wynn went to the little coat-cupboard just inside the entrance to fetch a tweed cape before joining Derek in the grounds, but to her surprise found him there, just changing out of his muddy boots. Suddenly she realized that since their arrival at Chenerys she and Derek had not once been alone in each other's company. Perhaps on both sides there had been a conscious avoidance of any intimacy; a feeling that there was plenty of time and that just now was premature.

"Back already?"

He finished knotting his laces, straightened up and regarded her, curiously tongue-tied and flushed. The confined walls hemmed them close. The small room was stuffy, filled with the smell of peat from the tweed coats and capes hung in a row; dim, too, for the one window was matted over with ivy. For the first time in months she was aware of Derek's superior inches. She had been feeling maternal about him for so long. Now she noticed how his eyes, all this past year burnt out, had lit with an eager, hot flame. Absurd, this tremor of the pulses! As though a brand-new lover were causing her heart to flutter and throb. It *was* a new Derek who faced her. Did she quite know him?

"Well?" she fended, and laughed.

"Don't," he muttered, and crushed her into his arms.

Had she struggled? No reason, now. Tom, if

he were here to see, would be the first to rejoice. Derek's kisses sank deep into her being. She let herself go. Hungrily they clung, lips, bodies, hearts. They were two vibrant, aching halves, come together to form one, indivisible whole.

Steps outside—clipping purposefully in from the drive. Derek's gaze was on the door. Eyes misted, Wynn put his arms gently away.

"Only Fred Fitts." She grimaced, roughly batting her curls into order. "I thought we'd had the daily visitation."

"Fitts, eh? So he's been along before?"

"Of course, why not? Had coffee with us after you cleared out. Naturally this murder business is just his own cup of tea."

She brushed a last kiss on his rather sullen mouth, and hands in pockets, sallied forth to greet the major.

"Well," she called idly, "what's the latest bulletin?"

Major Fitts stood fidgeting by the gate-legged table. He stared densely at Wynn, then at Derek, who emerged with one hand flattening a lock of disarranged hair. Now he cleared his throat portentously, but waited till the group was enlarged by Pat and Alison, at that moment coming downstairs. Evidently he had some weighty communication to make, and would not waste it till he had a full audience.

"Been chatting with Dawkins," he barked. "The official view is that Glover was pipped off from a passing car."

Flat silence. Pat scowled down at a laddered stocking. At last Wynn, with patient boredom, informed Alison that Joe Dawkins was the village constable, usually regarded as a moron.

"So what?" She quirked an eye at the major and lit a cigarette.

"Most reasonable, I must say." The major glared over their heads. "Short range, light good——"

"How do they know it was?" asked Derek with interest.

"How?" The major turned truculently. "Why, man, the condition of the body. Rigor mortis and all that stuff. It's definitely decided that the killing must have occurred between six and seven yesterday evening. Here's what they say: Glover had stationed himself right in the centre of that gap. Probably stood there some time from the way his heels were dug in. Alone, mark you. Waiting." Fitts paused dramatically and looked round. "Well! Shots got him, he fell back, partly behind the hedge —which is why, I imagine, he wasn't spotted till these girls came by on their horses. Now, then, do you get the inference?"

The total lack of response was really rather hard on the poor man. Alison took pity on him; and besides, she was curious, if the others weren't.

"I'll buy it, Major."

"Dawkins' point is that whoever fired them knew he'd find Glover there—and came prepared." He looked round for applause. Not getting it he amplified his meaning. "In other words, an appointment Prearranged meeting. You see?"

"Good old Joe," said Wynn. "Didn't know he had it in him."

"Dawkins? He didn't think of it. That's Jack Stafford's idea. When it was repeated to me I rang him up." Slight worry clouded the major's neat features. "Had to," he explained hesitatingly. "Thought Stafford ought to know that—that I

drove along that lane yesterday evening, at a few minutes before seven. On my way to the vicarage." He cleared his throat.

Another silence. Derek said quietly, "I made that same journey, you know—and at very much the same time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"You, too?" The eyeglass pinioned the speaker. Then the major nodded. "Right, I remember. You went along to Bewkesbury. On my errand, wasn't it?"

"I was going anyway. I did collect your package."

The major continued to stare at Derek, the sun turning his monocle into a tiny disk of fire. Musingly he said, "Arthur preceded both of us, I fancy. At least, I supposed he was heading that way."

The name caught Pat's ear. She glowered, but before she could voice her indignation her sister put in quickly:

"And twenty other people, I dare say. Why the post-mortem?"

"Post mortem!" The major took the word in its literal sense. "They've held one, you know. They've dug out the two bullets. There was nothing else in the corpse—or on it."

"What do you mean, 'on it'?" asked Alison, struck by the words.

Quite suddenly the major backed water. "Oh," he faltered, confused, "just that they found nothing in his pockets to—to account for his being there at that particular time. No chit, no——" He broke off, cocking his ear to the peal of the telephone—eager, it seemed, to change the subject.

"Yes, Padgett?" said Pat to the butler who entered.

"For Major Fitts, madam—Mr. John Kingsclere it is. He was told he would probably find the major here."

Fitts stumped off to the office. Those in the lounge heard a double series of explosions.

"Donald Duck and his twin," murmured Wynn resignedly. "I hope they clear this thing up, or we'll have no peace."

Puffed with importance, the major returned.

"Stafford's calling in the Yard," he announced, "and Kingsclere's saying it's an insult to our own superintendent—wants me to join in a protest. I wonder——?" He beat a nervous tattoo.

"Does it mean," ventured Alison, "that already they've eliminated all the likely suspects?"

"Looks like it." The major mumbled, meeting no one's eyes. "Perhaps, on the whole, it will be better to get outside help."

He made a few abortive sounds and took himself off.

A moment later Wynn and Derek found themselves alone.

"And now," she asked resolutely, "what's on your chest?"

He sent her a swift, guilty glance. "Chenerys," he answered, and drew in a long breath. "Look, old girl! Call me batty if you like. The fact is I'm going to keep this place on—or make a darned good stab at it. Well! Has that knocked you?"

"So that's it!" Her eyes shone. "Oh, my darling, will it be possible?"

He shrugged, pressed her fingers. "Gregg says not. Oh, it's true finances are all fouled up! Debts all over the shop, no profits. There could be profits, though, under a different régime. At least, that's my argument." He wet his lips. "It's this taking it for granted I can't cope that's putting my back up. If I could count on you——"

"On *me*?"

"I'd have to, Wynn. Listen, here's my idea . . ."

That evening Alison heard about it.

"We'll run a rest-house," declared Wynn, briskly cold-creaming her face before her friend's dressing-glass. "Sounds better than boarding-house, don't you think? All these bedrooms—and the garden for vegetables. We'll keep some of the horses, because that's part of the plan—to let our guests hunt, and to teach riding to those who need it. I'll have to get round old John Kingsclere, but that, I believe, can be managed. Derek can even practise his vetting. He's up to date, the vet here isn't too good."

"It sounds great stuff, Wynn. What a marvellous scheme!"

"Gregg must go, of course. He's decent, but you can't change him, so he'd prove only a drag. Derek's given him six months' notice so he can look round for another post."

Alison thought: What a brick Wynn is! Glowing with energy and eagerness—yes, and pride; ready this minute to tackle what would for both of them prove a Herculean task.

All at once the vivid face clouded. "Poor Tom!" whispered Wynn.

"Don't," urged Alison. "It's not as though either you or Derek could have helped his dying. Don't you know he'd be glad this place wasn't sold?"

"Yes, that's true. It always hurt him that Derek felt willing to let it go. This land's been in the family four hundred years."

They fell silent. After a moment Alison said slowly, "I'd meant to ask you, Wynn. It was Tom's heart that gave way?"

"Old Blount said so," answered Wynn. "That's all I know."

Yet Colin had declared . . . no, best not to say it.

"Dr. Blount . . . yes. I met him at the hunt breakfast. Would you say he was good?"

"He's well liked anyhow. There wasn't time to get any one else."

"You mean Tom collapsed directly they got him home?"

"After his leg was set. It was horribly sudden. I'm told that one minute he was making light of the whole thing and begging for a whisky and soda. Padgett came back with it and found him gone, with the doctor moving heaven and earth to restore him. Just like that." A spasm of pain crossed Wynn's face.

Alison looked thoughtful. She was remembering Dr. Blount's breath, his watery eye. It was not for her, however, to raise doubts as to his competency. Now Tom was dead it could only distress.

The next afternoon, just as Wynn was sallying forth to give a riding lesson to the youngest Horrocks child—aged four—Chief Inspector Headcorn was announced.

"Wynn," cried Alison excitedly, "it must be that friend of Colin's—don't you remember our telling you about him? And to think Scotland Yard has sent him here. He must have come to get our story of finding Glover's body."

In trudged a heavily-built man with a wart on his large nose. He blinked surprisedly at Alison and shook hands first with her, then with Wynn.

"I'd no idea," he said, "that you were the American lady. Well, well. This makes business a pleasure. Only a formality, my interviewing you and Miss Marchmont. Will you tell me about your discovery?"

Alison did most of the talking. "Pretty awful,"

she wound up. "I was specially upset because, you see, I'd met this poor man just recently, the first time I came down to Chenerys. He was very good about helping Dr. Ladbroke and me when our host, Mr. Boldre, met with a hunting mishap."

She looked uncomfortable. The inspector noted it and understood. Tactfully he said, "That would have been the late Mr. Thomas Boldre, wouldn't it?" Turning to Wynn he asked, "And did you know this farmer?"

"Only by sight," Wynn explained, adding that Glover had not long been one of the Chenerys' tenants. She jammed her bowler on her curls. "Is there anything more I can tell you? Because if not, I shall have to cut off."

"Miss Young will do nicely for the few questions I may ask." Inspector Headcorn waited till he and Alison were alone and then suggested they stroll along together to the scene of the crime. "You might just show me from what angle you caught sight of the corpse."

They took the path between tall poplars which bisected the grounds and ended at the lane. Alison sighed happily as she fitted her steps to the long, measured stride.

"My, but this is a relief, Inspector! I've been feeling so pent-up since this happened. Wondering if I was the only person in the house who was afflicted with morbid tastes."

"You mean no one where you're visiting seems interested in this death?"

"Not a soul, unless it's the servants. Half a dozen people have dropped in yesterday and to-day. They say a casual word, and get straight on to the important topics."

"Such as——?"

"Oh, somebody's new Irish stallion; how the dry weather will affect flat-racing; who's dropped what on the Lincoln. Tell me, Inspector, do you believe Glover was shot from a car?"

"Oh, so you've heard that, have you?" Headcorn's dull eye swivelled round on her.

"Oh, yes, it's the local belief! I myself don't see how the shots could have been fired through the opposite hedge. It's four feet thick and matted like a thatched roof. I suppose they must feel pretty sure about the car, or else they wouldn't have kept this lane blocked from traffic. Think you'll be able to get anything from the various tyre-prints?" She hoped her voice sounded sufficiently casual.

"I hope so. It's a bit of luck this lane is so little used—only, I understand, by persons who find it a convenient short cut. I shall get to work on the tracks presently. What, by the way, was your impression of Glover?"

"Glover! Just how did he strike me? Lazy; obliging; a cut above my idea of a common farmer. And yet too soft somehow. It's hard to explain. I don't quite know if I'd have trusted him; maybe I found him a shade too—well, ingratiating. You know? He spoke like an educated man, and he evidently read a good deal."

"H'm! *Reader's Digest* in bulk?"

"Oh, so you've spotted those, have you?" Alison laughed.

They entered the lane where the hedge terminated, some hundred yards westward from the opposite gully. The inspector paused and blinked round.

"Just where," he asked, "did that minor accident to Mr. Tom Boldre occur?"

She pointed. "Why, just over there, by those trees. All that's Glover's ground."

"Let's wander along and look at it."

Surprised that he should waste time on anything so irrelevant, Alison clambered over the low wall and led him to the stony edge of the field where Tom had come down, describing the circumstances as they went. The inspector sleepily surveyed the spot, taking in the transverse wall on the one side, the dark, thick timber on the other. Presently he asked where Glover had been when she first spied him.

"Oh, somewhere about there." She indicated the point a few paces from the wood. "I imagine he had just come through the trees and bushes from the upper end and only that moment seen us."

"And the man already here with Mr. Boldre was——?"

"His brother, Derek Boldre. It's he who has now got the estate. It won't interest you, of course, but between ourselves he's going to marry the girl you met just now—Mrs. Tom Boldre's sister."

She thought that the inspector was getting wearied of her prattle. Soon his questions sounded absent—probably because it was easy to see just where the corpse had lain, the imprint of Glover's form being fixed in the hardening mud. She left him, pleased that however she had let her tongue run away with her she had said not a word about her private knowledge of the car-tracks. Let him find that out for himself—if he could.

To the inspector the labyrinthine tracks were quite decipherable; and yet before long he was swearing to himself. True he had picked out not only the prints of latest occurrence but the types of tyres which had made them; but this done he was stumped. At certain points he found the overlapping obscured by bad slurs which a strong lens

and a millimetre rule did not help to clear up. If any car had stopped just opposite the gully all sign of this had been eradicated. On the whole, after much sweating and thought, he was inclined to assume there had been no stoppage at all. The car in question might have kept its engine going, merely slowing down to a crawl. It could have happened, if the murderer possessed a sufficiently good aim ; and there remained the possibility that the shots had been fired by someone on foot.

Brisk steps and a voice roused him. Still hunched over his task he glanced up to see a middle-aged gentleman of military spruceness bearing down on him.

" Good-afternoon ! I take it you are the inspector from Scotland Yard ? "

" Quite, sir. And I am addressing ? "

" Fitts is my name. I live at Yew Lodge, you know, just at the end of this lane. Hah ! Tyre-prints, is it ? Thought so. Well, I may be able to give you a little assistance."

They always put it like that. Patiently Headcorn got to his feet.

" Kind of you, sir. It's Major Frederick Fitts, isn't it ? "

" Right, Inspector." Gratified, the major flicked his monocle into his eye. " Chief Constable mentioned me, I suppose ? Hum, yes. Did he tell you how I tooled past here Saturday evening more or less around the time Glover was pipped off ? Passed here twice—once going to the vicarage, once coming back." Forestalling comment, he stooped, scanned the tangle of prints, and plumped his ash-stick on one of them.

" There ! Knew I could spot my Ford V 8's signature. See that small flaw ? " He indicated a

triangular indentation the inspector had at once noted in his book. "Care to come and have a look at the actual tyre?"

"Thanks, Major, I may call round. Can you give me the exact times of your two journeys?"

"M-m-m . . . I think so, Inspector. Ask Crump —that's the vicar—if I didn't turn up at his place pretty close to seven. That would mean I passed this bit at—shall we say six-forty? I know I left Crump at eight sharp. What beats me is not seeing that damned body."

"Tell me, Major," the inspector said, "had you any acquaintance with this man Glover?"

"Oh, lord, yes. Small farming chap, lived just up that hill. Dozens of times I've called by his place to water my horse."

"Did you hear the two shots?"

"Can't recall noticing anything. If I did, I must have taken them for backfires. Like every one else, or so I've gathered." The major seemed to be thinking hard. "I suppose," he blurted out "rather a lot will turn on those bullets?"

"It may," confirmed the inspector guardedly.

"Oh, then the weapon's not been found? Well, and it won't be, Inspector." The statement was made almost in triumph. Fitts added, "I mean, would any chap in his senses let a gun be traced to him? Not much. It would be too damned idiotic."

Odd, that. The Chief Constable from his bed of sickness had delivered the same opinion, and with much the same satisfaction.

CHAPTER NINE

THE main road on which both Chenerys and Sompton Hall abutted formed connections with the route to Bewkesbury market-town on the one hand, the mile stretch of lane on the other, and, directly opposite, a short fork leading at once into Sompton village, by way of the church. At the junction were paddocks; and into one of these Sergeant Budworth gazed raptly, intent on the perfections of two dappled hunters. His chief's voice ruptured his dream. Six feet of cricketer's muscle straightened round, revealing a face as downy as a young duckling.

"I've collected what you wanted, sir. Is your job done?"

"It is," grumbled the inspector dissatisfiedly. "And now, I suppose, these hurdles can come away. That the vicarage along there? Get the car, we'll drive to it."

The Reverend Hilary Crump, torn from meditation over a brand-new bridle, gave the anticipated replies. Major Fitts had arrived for the school's meeting promptly at seven, if not a little before the hour, and had taken his departure at eight.

"Which," observed the inspector, back in the two-seater the Chief Constable had kindly placed at his disposal, "tells us just nothing. Drive to that gully. I'd like to make a small test."

In five minutes they reached the gap in the hedge. Headcorn issued more instructions, which met with outraged protest.

"Lie down? What, me, in all this wet?"

"Exactly. Pretend you're the corpse now, while the light is just as it was on Saturday. Oh, to hell with your clothes!"

Hardheartedly the inspector drove on. A dozen times, back and forth and at varying speeds, he re-passed the gully. Finally he stopped and released his disgruntled victim, who climbed back into the car and began sulkily to scrape mud from his shoes.

"Well, sir, and what did you get from that act of cruelty?"

"Not much. It's possible to spot it, and just as possible to miss it altogether, because of the angle at which Glover lay."

"You are banking on its being there between six and seven, are you?"

"It seems probable, from the medical report. They made due allowance for acceleration of body-cooling as result of the night air and the registered temperature outside."

"Don't forget he lay in running water," said the sergeant bitterly. "Blooming Niagara that is."

"What, that trickle? What I want to hunt now is real water. A lake, a pond. Where? Doesn't matter, if it's within chucking range of the road."

They scoured the neighbourhood, making ever-widening circuits. Not till they had regained the Sompton cross-roads did Budworth receive an order to halt, followed by a second command which he found somewhat mystifying. He got out, scanned the ditch, and handed his chief a fairly hefty stone. For a second it looked as though the inspector were about to bean him with it. The next, he was deluged by a cold shower from some source unseen.

"Cripes! Wasn't I drowned enough to please you?"

Wheeling indignantly Budworth saw, just in the crotch of a scrubby hedge, a minute duck-pond so covered with green slime as to appear undistinguishable from the enclosing meadow.

"I spied it straight off," chuckled the inspector. "It seemed entirely too obvious, that's all."

"Obvious! My hat, it's too shallow! Why, in a couple of days it'll be just a graveyard for dead newts."

"Still, we'll get it dragged. Look, is that car stopping?"

Edging on them from the northerly road was a pale, opulent Rolls-Bentley. Its lone occupant, a man of some eight and twenty years, seemed a part of its streamlines and even its colour-scheme, his bleached hair, tanned blond skin and light, carelessly worn homespuns all of one piece. Eyes neutral and self-contained dwelt on the official couple.

"You two from Scotland Yard?" asked the young man, his voice level and detached. "I thought you might be interested to examine my tyres."

A little later a second car drew up—a poor relation of a car, seemingly held together by string. It exhaled a stale, hot gust, as though fumes from the engine were penetrating a leak. Again only the man at the wheel, and he, too, was young, though dark and with curiously contrasting light hazel eyes. The chariest of greetings passed between the two drivers. At once the Rolls-Bentley sped on into the village, leaving the new-comer the field. The latter leant out.

"I was told," said he diffidently, "that you Yard men were trying to sort out the cars that came along

this lane on Saturday evening. This one did. Want to look at it ? "

" This one, eh ? Thanks very much, sir. And your name ? "

" Derek Boldre. My place lies over there."

" Chenerys ? To be sure. Did you make one or two journeys ? "

" Two, the first within that hour. You'll find these tyres pretty battered."

The inspector studied them. " Right, Mr. Boldre, your tracks figure prominently in the uppermost series. And what about the times ? "

As the owner of the Austin deliberated, Headcorn absorbed certain details. Nervous type, wire-strung, with sensitive reactions, mostly well hidden.

" Let's see," said Derek. " That gap's about midway the lane, isn't it ? I left my place somewhere round six-forty. Don't rely on that, of course. I wasn't thinking of the time, although . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, a fact Headcorn pigeon-holed. " If I say I usually take about twelve minutes to reach Bewkesbury Station, could you work that out ? It's two miles from here, three from Chenerys."

" How long did you stop ? "

" Not more than ten minutes. When I was putting up my car the stable-clock showed seven-fifteen."

Budworth was taking this down. The inspector remarked, " I suppose it's absurd to ask if you noticed the body. Did you see any one at all in the lane, going or returning ? "

" Not a soul ; and I don't think I heard any shots."

" Do you recall looking at the gap ? "

" Did I ? That I can't be sure about. I'm used

to seeing it, of course—and I understand Glover lay pretty much behind the hedge."

"He was your tenant, I believe?"

"For the last few days, yes; but I hardly knew him. I've lived in London till my brother's death. Anything more?"

"Not just now. Thanks for the help."

The Austin rattled away.

Budworth gave a low whistle. "Well! I don't quite know when we've come across so many obliging people," he observed. As the only response was a massive shrug, he continued, "Look, sir, at the high-water mark of that pond. There's been a three-inch shrinkage, very likely since the Saturday shower."

"It's asinine to think of finding the revolver here," said Headcorn. "Only a fool or a badly-funked person would have thrown incriminating evidence into a thimbleful of slime half a mile from his victim's body. Still, we'll make sure at daybreak."

At the small police station in Bewkesbury they found a most capable document prepared by the superintendent in charge. Conclusively it proved that none of the likely suspects in the neighbourhood could have done the murder.

"See?" said Superintendent Mitcham, a stout, comfortable man. "First old Larch—heard at Easter blackguarding Glover for doing him a dirty deal with a cow. He's been crippled with inflammatory rheumatism for a week; bedridden, had Dr. Blount with him when the shooting must have occurred. Next Pilkins. Bought an old motor-bike off Glover, and called it so much scrap-iron. Pictures for him, with a party of friends, and carried on with the usher. Last, Blalock—he's a saddler—who made

passes at Glover's wife and got a thrashing as payment. Mind, I dare say she led him on. He went on Friday to Gloucester, stopped till Monday, and has all his movements vouched for by reliable witnesses."

" I see you've re-checked them all most carefully, Superintendent. Well, the result doesn't surprise me. You say there's been a message from the Chief Constable ? Good, I'll buzz along now to report progress, such as it is. Before I go, what can you tell me about these gentry whose names I've taken down ? "

The superintendent eyed the three names and seemed less astonished than uneasy. " So they've all come forward, have they ? Prominent persons, Inspector ; right in the top rank . . ."

On the drive westward the inspector wore a moody frown. " Having seen the competence of that report," he said, " I wonder still more just why I was called down. Unless——"

" Something struck you, sir ? " prompted the sergeant.

" Oh, well, let's wait and see."

Twin monkey-puzzle trees guarded the approach to Colonel Stafford's white house, their wicked spines softened in the gathering dusk. Dogs barked riotously ; whinnyings came from the unseen stables. In an upper room a strong, fretful voice lashed out blasphemously at an invisible persecutor, and a blind was drawn down over its rectangle of light.

An odd incident happened. Just as Headcorn rang, out blundered a grizzled, bulbous-nosed man who carried a black bag. He saw the solid figure on the doorstep, ducked his head, and made a most precipitous plunge into the mud-streaked car which

was parked in the drive. His mottled hands were shaking badly as he jerked at the self-starter, and his head was bent low.

" Regularly soaked," breathed Budworth, craning to examine the vanishing car. " Did you get a whiff of him as he passed ? "

CHAPTER TEN

THE colonel lay propped against pillows, his room reeking of that medicament pronounced equally beneficial for both man and beast. His face was tanned leather; his deep-blue eyes pierced as he hurled aside the copy of *The Farmers' Year Book* he had been reading and offered his visitor a drink.

"Well!" He splashed Glengarra into a tumbler and a medicine-glass. "And what about those tyre-prints?"

"You might have let your own people handle them," said the inspector bluntly. "The force here seems thoroughly able."

"Oh, Mitcham's no dunce!" The words came out too quickly. Conscious of error, the Chief Constable tried to mend matters. "On simple routine he's quite adequate, Inspector. I realized, though, that we were getting stalled. Have you identified the cars?"

"Three out of a possible four, sir—with the volunteered help of the owners. Major Fitts' Ford, Mr. Boldre's Austin and young Mr. Kingsclere's Rolls."

"I see." A hissing, indrawn breath. "And did any of them stop?"

"It's quite impossible to be sure. Besides, a little slowing may well have permitted the shots to be fired. Here, sir, is the chart I've drawn. You'll see that I've set down the order of overlapping, the measurements of the wheel-bases and tyre-patterns, each initialled. I doubt if we can pin down the

exact time of the shooting. Thus far no one I've questioned is other than vague, though a number of persons heard the shots and took them for back-firing."

Swearing luridly as pain gripped him, the colonel studied the intricate tracing. The inspector proceeded to give the statements as regarded time which he had obtained from the three men who had accosted him in the road.

"Mr. Kingsclere made only the one journey. Coming back he branched off at the Sompton cross-roads and took the main route home. He was the first to drive along the lane. He puts it at a little after six; and the inquiries made in Bewkesbury tend to confirm him."

The invalid seemed to have found a more comfortable posture. His features had smoothed a trifle as he grunted, "And the others?"

"If you will glance at the chart, you will see their times recorded. Only Mr. Kingsclere recalls noticing the gully. He was interested to see how much the rain had increased the flow of that brook——"

"Yes, yes, he's a horse running. And——?"

"He declares there was no body there. Still, my own tests show that driving from east to west it was fairly easy to miss seeing it."

"Humph! Yes . . . And have you got anything more from the Glover wench?"

"Nothing, Colonel." The inspector rubbed his wart with vexation. "As a matter of fact," he added slowly, "that woman's puzzling. Too smug—too bland. Her husband wasn't a night-prowler. She must have been worried when he didn't come home; yet she waited till daylight to hunt for him—and when she did turn out, the farm-lad saw

her making straight for that gully. She doesn't strike me as frank."

A long silence. The man in the bed levelled penetrating eyes.

"You won't solve this case, Inspector. Don't say I've not warned you it's going to prove a hopeless task."

"Wynn," ventured Alison uncertainly. "How do you yourself feel about Gregg?"

They had left behind them the baking-hot stable-yard. A moment before Wynn, slim and efficient in grey shirt and twill breeches, had been arguing with an irritated Derek over which hunters to put up for sale, while Gregg, unwanted, disparaged every move. It was the agent's quiet persistence and his general air of discouraging which had prompted the question.

"Gregg?" Wynn was calming down. "Oh, Gregg's all right, you know! Honest to a fault—and so conscientious it's a pain in the neck. That's his trouble, don't you see? Gregg firmly believes our scheme will go on the rocks, leaving us worse off than before; that the only wise thing is to make a clean sweep of responsibilities, take what cash may be left and call it a day."

She kicked at a snail. With returning rancour she continued:

"Of course we're getting fed up with all this kindly advice. It's not as though either Gregg or Fred Fitts were any sort of expert."

"Oh, the major!" Alison spoke soothingly. "I wouldn't pay the least notice to what he was saying at lunch. Obviously he's taking his entire cue from Gregg."

"Oh, I know. I suppose I never could stick

meddlesome people. Fred's curiosity is beyond any I ever knew. See him breaking his neck to get a squint at your wire ? "

" Pity he didn't," giggled Alison. " Here, read it."

Wynn frowned perplexedly over Colin's message. " *Forced retreat, army wins.* Is that code ? "

Alison interpreted. " That's in answer to what I told him about the flattering attentions I've wished on myself through listening to the major when you others were too bored. You know, taking all that trouble over getting my specs riveted and pestering me to come and look at his Indian pictures."

" Go on," grinned her friend. " Queen it over me with your conquests." She sighed and loosed Alison's arm. " Oh, well, back to the fray ! " Bracing herself, she returned to the stables, leaving her guest to seek a cool spot to do some manuscript reading.

There was a second conquest—call it that !—which Alison had not mentioned. Gregg no less than the major had been quietly seeking her company, only when she was alone. Coming on his grey-gabled house, screened by drooping laburnum and looking as dreary as the owner himself, she began tiptoeing from pure habit. Often this last day or so Gregg had issued forth to join her rambles, and she strongly disliked being made a receptacle for his queer, half-confidences. Not personal ones ; that she could have borne. No, entirely on the subject of Chenerys, the sad changes witnessed in his time, and the pity of it that Derek in his foolhardy ignorance should be throwing good money after bad in his effort to save his patrimony.

What most exasperated her was Gregg's doleful smile ; that and his well-bred understatements. A miasma of resignation hung about him, making

her feel her two friends were heading through fog straight on to a reef.

Down by the brook. A flat stone, under those cool, curtaining willows? She took a few steps and drew back. There in front of her was Major Fitts, dangerously at a loose end, mooning about among the rank, lush grasses and poking them dejectedly with his stick. Her lips twitched as she watched him—nobody's child, sent to play by himself, ready to fasten on the first comer like a leech.

Softly she stole away. Her beautiful blue sandals! As she settled on a bench under a far-distant red hawthorn she noticed the disgusting black mire on them—collected, she supposed, in the wet, spongy weeds.

"Is it tar? If so, it'll never come off."

Her head was bent and she was busily scraping at the stuff with a stick. That was why the person coming towards her got quite close before she realized his approach and the shadow falling across her ankle made her look up with a start.

Just prior to the lunch-hour Inspector Headcorn had been shown into Major Fitts' presence.

"Is this your property, Major?" he demanded, and exhibited a dully-gleaming, discoloured object.

Fitts' sun-reddened face blanched and broke into sweat. "Where d'you get hold of it?"

"Then it is yours. Quite sure?"

The major trembled, passing a palm over his sparse hairs. "Oh, **yes**," he mumbled. "You'll see my initials scratched on the barrel. Here's the —the registration number." He produced a neat morocco diary and displayed certain numerals. "W-where?" he stammered, and waited, on tenterhooks.

Briefly Headcorn told him. Fitts stiffened and glared.

"That scum of water? Rubbish! I don't believe it. Why, in a half-way drought——" The major stopped, ears fiery red. "Lost it," he muttered. "Never dreamed it would turn up. It was—the one?"

"It was."

All the remaining starch wilted out of him. Fitts slumped into a chair and sat there, hunched.

"Lost it?" Headcorn surveyed his victim a moment and said more kindly, "Don't worry, Major, I didn't come here with a warrant. Just tell me about this weapon, when and in what circumstances it left your possession."

"Quite, Inspector. Yes, yes, I'll tell you . . . as best I can."

Headcorn felt sure he had not expected ever to see his property again.

"It was lately, was it?" prompted the inspector. "Perhaps your housekeeper would remember. Shall we call her in and ask her?"

"No, no, no need for that, I remember perfectly now, it was the day after poor Tom Boldre's funeral. I was in here cleaning all my firearms that afternoon——"

"The afternoon of the day that Glover was shot."

The major ignored the quiet statement and continued his story:

"I was in here, with the window open, pottering in and out of the room. Then when I came to hang up my revolver again, it wasn't there. Couldn't find it."

"And you have no idea who could have taken it?"

"Oh, none at all. It was lying here."

The inspector measured the distance from the table to the window, then asked:

"Did you report your loss?"

"Not officially."

"But you did tell someone. Am I right?"

"I—I happened that evening to ring up Colonel Stafford, and in the course of talk I did mention . . . eh, what?"

But the inspector, his face still wearing the smile that had startled Fitts, was already on his way out.

"I could get the whole truth from him, I suppose," reflected the latter, "or, perhaps, from the Chief Constable; but there's a much simpler way. I've got half of what I wanted. Whatever the Glover woman is keeping back, it's nothing to do with this chap's story."

He had made a more strenuous attempt to pin the Welsh widow down. "Once again, Mrs. Glover. Have you no idea whom your husband went out to meet?"

He had fancied an alert gleam as she answered, "Why, Inspector, he never told me he was meeting any one!"

Asked what she had thought when Glover failed to return home, she explained that she had assumed he had cut across fields to Mr. Gregg's house to get some advice about the sick horse.

"George often went there and sometimes he stopped late. I just dropped asleep."

No note mentioning a rendezvous had come to light, though Headcorn had gone over a vast accumulation of rubbish, Mrs. Glover helping him with great willingness. The appointment might have been made verbally; but where and at what time?

"There's The Green Man," said the Welsh voice

dreamily. "Only, you see, George never went to that pub or any other all that last week. Stopped home he did, playing the radio and reading his little bits of magazines. I don't believe he stirred off this place for a good three days, excepting only to attend poor Mr. Boldre's funeral. Friday that was, at noon."

"You said just now that your husband seemed quiet and thoughtful just recently. Worried, alarmed?"

"Oh, nothing like that, Inspector! George used to get those quiet fits, you know. If I tried to get out of him what it was about he'd turn it off with a joke."

Williams, the farm-lad, had also spoken of the pensive mood, which had struck him as the reverse of despondent, "like as if he'd got something good up his sleeve." The hobbledehoy mentioned that on another occasion of late his employer had gone into "a sort of trance like"; and he, Williams, had presently dug up a small and doubtless quite unrelated incident known only to himself. These matters now revolved through the inspector's brain.

Through a gap in the dark yews he saw Major Fitts emerge from the cottage and move across the meadows behind the house in the direction of Chenerys. With a glance at his watch, the inspector retrod the bricked path and again hammered on the knocker.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"ME, SIR?"

The housekeeper's amazement rang slightly false. Behind her stony exterior the woman was clearly on guard.

"Oh, just a question or two I neglected to put to Major Fitts! You'll remember last Saturday when he was cleaning his guns. At what time did his caller arrive?"

She stared back at him speechless. Lips scarcely moving, she asked, "Which of the two gentlemen do you mean?"

Two birds with one shot! But of course. Why not two?

"I was referring to Mr. Kingsclere," said Headcorn calmly. "Although you may as well tell me about Mr. Boldre also. He came first, or second?"

"First. At least"—still grudgingly—"I never let neither of them in, but when I called the major to the 'phone Mr. Derek was in the study sitting down, but Mr. Arthur—that's to say young Mr. Kingsclere—was leaning over the sill from outside, like as if he'd that minute stopped by."

"Which had the major expected?"

"Why, neither, sir. Or if they was it wasn't mentioned."

"And which was the earlier to go away?"

"Mr. Arthur. I know because, passing through this 'all, I heard his car start, but the others was still talking."

"I see." Headcorn turned to go. "Oh, by the way," he asked almost absently, "was it after

both had gone that the major mentioned not being able to find his revolver ? "

Swiftly she whispered, " Have they found it ? "

" The revolver ? Oh, yes ! And it was used to kill Glover."

She clapped a hand over her plump bosom. " Oh ! " she gasped and began trembling all over.

" I can't tell you one thing more. If you hadn't already known who was here——"

" I quite understand. You're in no way to blame. Both these gentlemen are well known to you, are they ? "

" Since they was little nippers. I've served both families—and there's no finer in the land." She panted, still short of breath. " It laid on that table, within easy reach of outside. I did think as how just any tramp could have taken it while the major was out of the room."

" Do many of his friends drop in informally ? "

" Who don't, so to speak ? The major's that hospitable-like. Always a welcome and the sherry or the whisky set out, whether it's high or low. I don't mean that there Glover ! " This was said with scorn. " He's never set foot in this house. It's people like Mr. Edward Gregg that thinks the world and all of him, and with reason. Mr. Boldre's agent," she explained. " To be sure he's a gentleman born."

" In and out pretty often, is he ? "

" Yes, just about every day ; but not to steal no pistol," she flared. " If it's him you're wondering about——"

" Not at all, Mrs.——"

" Hargrave." She shut her lips tight on the word.

" Thanks. I merely ask, did you yourself see this Mr. Gregg here or about the garden that same afternoon ? "

"I did not, sir; nor any one else, saving only those two gentlemen."

Over a cut from the joint and a tankard of mild and bitter the inspector improved an acquaintance begun the previous evening over darts with the landlord of The Green Man. He had hoped that the latter—a bald whippet of a man, garrulously inclined—might shed some light on Glover's recent movements, but such was not the case.

"Didn't set eyes on him all that last week. And before that I don't remember him talking private tc any one. Just a minute, sir, while I serve the doctor."

Into the bar had stumped a bottle-nosed man with a huge, ragged moustache. Setting thirsty lips to the double whisky poured for him he drank deeply and then took a roving survey of the room. He was undoubtedly the person seen in the dusk coming from the Chief Constable's; but why had his watery eye become fixed on Headcorn's face? The inspector returned the stare with calm interest and saw an odd thing happen. Spilling half his drink the doctor gulped the remainder, flung down a coin and hastily went out.

"No, doc's not himself," mused the landlord after a puzzled gaze and a long shake of the head. He leant confidential elbows on Headcorn's table. "Hasn't been, you know, since Mr. Tom Boldre pegged out on him so sudden." He explored a lone tooth reflectively.

"Hunting accident, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes and no. Meaning to say, oughtn't to 'ave finished like that, just breaking a thigh-bone. Heart, you know; and it's funny about that. Mr. Tom had dozens of mishaps, one or more just as bad. Seems you never can tell."

"So it was a big shock to his doctor?"

"Was it!" The landlord sunk his voice to an impressive whisper. "Comes in here," he hissed, "regularly doused as you might say. Just after, you know. I give him the bottle—see? And here's what he put down his throat." The dirty fingers measured a good tumblerful along the whisky bottle's side. "Truth, sir—and never staggered. Yes, Dr. Blount can carry it and no mistake."

"With no effect on his doctoring?"

"Well——!" The host pursed his lips. "I have heard the remark passed. I'm not saying it, though. Seems as how the 'ard riding sort of jolts it down. Wot I say is, show me a man wot won't miss a run with the 'ounds if he can 'elp it, and there won't be much amiss with him. Take Mr. Boldre, him wot's just dead . . ."

For the fifth or sixth time the inspector listened to much the same admiring discourse. There was no doubt that Tom Boldre had been universally popular—sunny-tempered, fair-dealing, the perfect sportsman.

"And what about his brother?"

Slowly the landlord said, "Oh, I've naught to say against Mr. Derek! Bit of a stranger, that's all. You can take it from me, though, he'll not come up to Mr. Tom's standard. No dare-devil in him. Twice the horseman he may be; but think he'll ever ride bare-backed up his own stairs on an 'igh-spirited mare? Not him!"

"Did Tom Boldre do that?" asked Headcorn interestedly. "When?"

"When?" Delighted chuckles held up speech. "Oh, about daybreak, three weeks ago, after our last hunt ball. Bad wrist and all."

"Any particular reason?"

"Oh, you know! Bit gay. Some of his crowd betted him he couldn't make it. They do say young Arthur Kingsclere dropped ten quid. Anyhow, it was a rare do, wot with the sister-in-law flying at Mr. Derek like a vixen, accusing him of egging his brother on to commit suicide. They say them steps is scarred from top to bottom, but Mr. Tom wasn't hurt, and neither was the 'orse. . . ."

Alison blinked at the solid, tweed-clad form now looming above her, smiled, and sprang up, shaking from her bright head a shower of deep-rose petals.

"Well, Inspector! And about time you called on me. Why the stealth?"

"Oh, I caught a glimpse of your blue jumper through the fence, and thought I'd have a quiet word with you, that's all."

She made way for him on the bench, but something in the heavy force with which he mopped a heat-streaming brow conveyed just a faint foreboding.

"Well," she said lightly, "what is it about?"

"Oh, nothing much. That hunt ball, you know. You and Dr. Ladbroke attended it, didn't you? I was just thinking I'd like to hear your version of what happened afterwards. About your host's riding one of his hunters up the stairs of this house."

A queer, gone feeling entered the pit of her stomach.

"Why?" she parried huskily. "What have you been told?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

PUMPED dry. That was her feeling; and back in the cool of her bedroom she asked herself worriedly the reason for all those searching questions. Not only about the silly, terrifying episode of the horse. All the following day had been raked over, bit by bit, to her own intense discomfiture.

"Why? There can't have been anything wrong about Tom's death. Even if there were, what would be the connection between it and—and the little accident we saw? Tom was perfectly well by the Sunday—and stayed well, till he broke his thigh.

"Derek was putting his handkerchief back into his pocket. What else? He'd been wiping Tom's face. Darn it all, nearly three weeks between that time and the other!"

The time interval restored her balance. She had not stirred up mud to engulf her two friends, for the simple reason that there could be no mud to be stirred up. She breathed again and went down to tea.

Arthur Kingsclere had reappeared. Though he was talking calmly with the two sisters her sensitized perceptions divined a new tautness in his manner. Derek had not come in; and then, after ten minutes, he emerged from the office, took a step forward, and as his eye lit on the tall visitor stationed by the table, halted with noticeable abruptness.

"Tea?" said Wynn blithely. "You want it after all that work."

He nodded slightly in Arthur's direction, shook

his head and fixed his unsmiling gaze on the silver teapot Pat had lifted.

"Can't leave off," he muttered. "Mind if I take a cup back with me and carry on with these accounts?"

Teacup in hand, he retreated. The office door closed, leaving an inexplicable hush to settle over the group.

"Thought I saw him driving into Bewkesbury just now," remarked Kingsclere without expression. He ground out his cigarette, picked up his loose chamois gloves and said good-bye.

"If Glover did make an appointment," said Superintendent Mitcham, "I believe he managed it quietly in the churchyard, just after Mr. Boldre was buried. Everybody was there, or at least all the men of the neighbourhood."

"Everybody—yes. By the way," said the inspector, "I rather wanted a little information about that agent at Chenerys."

"Edward Gregg! Now, in God's name, why?"

"Don't look so ruffled, Mitcham. I've not met the man. Any chance of his having wangled accounts?"

"Well——! He had the chance, I dare say. Any one could have diddled Tom Boldre. I'll stake my badge, though, Gregg never attempted it. Why, every child knows he was devoted to his employer! It's the general view that his contrivance alone has saved Chenerys all these late years."

"I see. . . . Any sign of Gregg's casting eyes on Mrs. Glover?"

The superintendent laughed. "That crock? I'm forgetting, you haven't seen him. No, he hasn't the guts. If a woman fancied him, he'd run a mile."

Dr. Blount's red-brick house faced on Sompton High Street. Inside it was stuffy, the walls covered with foxes' masks and crude oleographs of hunting scenes. Copies of *The Lancet* and *The British Medical Journal*, unopened, gathered dust on a what-not; and these and the general untidy jumble the inspector had an excellent opportunity to take in during the lengthy wait in store for him. The maid had believed the doctor would be back at any moment, but more than an hour had ticked by and still Headcorn sat alone. At last his ear detected a faint sound, within the house. A step ponderous but stealthy was creeping down some unseen rear stair. A back door creaked. The tread continued outside, crunching round a cinder path, and then, heralded by an ostentatious latch-key, re-entered from the front.

Headcorn rose. Dr. Blount stood before him, plaid cap on head, moustache bristling querulously.

"Who're you?" he growled. "Did I give you an appointment?"

The inspector introduced himself and asked for an interview.

"Yard detective! H'm—yes. Heard there was one knocking about. Well, make it short. I've got an urgent call six miles from here."

Eyes bloodshot; a glance that wavered while it pierced. Not, one would say, carrying his whisky with the vaunted ease . . .

"My question, Doctor, may sound a trifle oblique. All I am after is your own candid opinion regarding the death of your patient, Mr. Boldre of Chenerys. Will you give it to me?"

Blount seemed to mistrust his hearing. "Boldre's death!" He scowled. "God, man, what's this blather?"

"It may be entirely irrelevant," soothed the inspector. "If so, I apologise. I'd like all the same to know exactly how you yourself felt about that very sudden collapse."

The muddy eyes glared through their moist film. "I signed a death certificate, didn't I?" barked the doctor rudely. "Good! Then look it up."

"Heart failure. I've seen the certificate. I merely hoped to secure your theory as to what might have precipitated this in a subject apparently so sound."

The big head thrust forward. "See here," blustered Blount. "I've thirty-odd years' experience as a practising physician. If I'd noticed the least indication of unnatural death do you suppose I'd have kept it dark?"

"The word unnatural is yours, sir; but let's get this clear. I am not suggesting what is usually known as poison in any way, shape or form. I'm only asking you to describe to me in simple terms all you may have observed in your patient's last moments. I feel bound to point out to you that any refusal to do so allows instant prejudice."

"Prejudice, by God! You're here on the Glover business, aren't you? Quite. Then what in damnation blazes has another man's hunting smash got to do with it?"

"Everything—if it can establish a motive. Now, does that explanation satisfy——"

The loose jowls had blotched. The doctor swayed, clawing at the balusters.

"Steady, sir!"

Assistance came too late. The heavy body had slumped to the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE young maid came running. She helped raise the fallen man's head and peered into his face with more distress than astonishment.

"Doctor! Can you talk?"

Only formless mumbles issued from beneath the ragged moustache. She nodded and took brisk command.

"I'm to ring Dr. Cox, sir, at Bewkesbury. His number's on my dresser now, in case; if I might leave him with you a second?"

"He warned you he might have a stroke?" asked Headcorn.

"Oh, yes, sir! He had one bad turn, only it was in the night—and he said as how the next might be worse."

"I see. Suppose we get him on to his bed?"

The ill man was no easy load, but between them, puffing and blowing, they got his inert weight hoisted into an upper front room, which was dingy and reeked of tobacco.

"I'll see to him. You do your telephoning."

There was still no speech, and one side seemed powerless, but the left hand managed a clumsy gesture which Headcorn interpreted. Fetching a black medical bag from the mantelpiece, he took from it various small phials. When he held up the correct one the dull eyes signalled assent.

"Tabloids. One or two?"

The left hand lifted two hairy fingers. Headcorn laid a couple of the tabloids on the thickened tongue, saw the fumbling lips close over them. He brought

a glass of water from the washstand, but this Blount did not want. His breathing was stertorous, his colour bad, but gradually both improved. Before long he jerked an order which plainly conveyed, "Leave me. There's nothing you can do." At this moment the maid returned to announce that Dr. Cox would be here almost at once.

"Going, sir? Thanks ever so for lending me a hand."

Outside the house the inspector loitered with an eye on the upper window. No sound emerged. Presently a sky-blue roadster drove smartly up. From it alighted a very spick and span physician of some thirty years. He entered the door already opened for him, and all was quiet again.

Headcorn lingered on in the street. When Dr. Cox came out and was getting back into his car he found a big figure in sober grey tweeds beside him.

"Oh," exclaimed the younger man, his face breaking into a sunny smile. "So you're the inspector who was calling on Dr. Blount?"

"That's right, Doctor. And how is he now?"

"Well!" Cox lowered his voice dubiously. "Early stages, of course. With complete rest and so on it's just possible we may see him fairly fit again—in time. For the present, you understand" —still more confidentially—"he mustn't be excited. Highly dangerous. I'm afraid your little conversation must be postponed."

"Then he was able to tell you about it?"

Dr. Cox looked slightly dashed. "Not exactly, Inspector. I managed, though, to gather a general notion of what it was all about. Dr. Blount seems upset at not having straightened out your little misconception over Mr. Boldre's heart collapse.

Well, as it happens I know a bit about the case. Wouldn't I do as well?"

"That's good of you, Doctor. Did your colleague discuss the matter with you at the time?"

"Mentioned it—yes. Not only then, but—you may think it more important—considerably earlier. Possibly you are under the impression that the patient's heart was a fairly sound organ?"

"I know nothing whatever about it. I wanted information."

"I see." Cox was now entirely serene. "Then it may interest you to hear that fully two years ago Dr. Blount warned Mr. Boldre of a serious valvular defect. Athlete's heart—you know? He rowed for Oxford. So many of these chaps get an enlargement."

"So one hears. Would it seem strange to you that having stood up to very numerous shocks his heart should on this occasion give out?"

"Not in the very least, Inspector. Pure luck—as I can cite dozens of cases to prove."

"His family seemed unaware of any weakness," said the inspector, and paused.

"That's hardly surprising, is it? It's quite certain Mr. Boldre himself failed to appreciate the gravity of the condition, so quite likely he never spoke of it. He was that kind of man." One pale, hairless hand flicked invisible fluff from the opposite coat-sleeve. "Naturally," said Cox, "every one was badly knocked by his death. Even poor Blount himself. Oh, dear, yes! Still, a smashed thigh is no joke. The shock alone—see what I mean?"

"Alone," echoed the inspector musingly, and fancied a swift glance in his direction. "Well! And how soon do you think Dr. Blount can talk to me?"

The smile vanished. In its place settled deep gloom.

"Ah, that's asking, Inspector! Between ourselves, I'm rather pessimistic about the poor old chap. He's older than you'd imagine, and with all that extra weight. . . . Right side's dead as mutton, you know. However! Assuming he does recover power of articulation and motor-activity, I'd say—well, we mustn't let him risk any serious discussion for another three weeks. I'm off now to find him a nurse. Good-day to you, Inspector!"

Radiant again, Dr. Cox slid into his seat.

Sergeant Budworth hove in sight to find his superior planted in the High Street, scratching his chin. Budworth, who had spent a weary afternoon in the woods near the Glover farm, reported that thus far the widow had remained indoors and seen no one but the farm-lad.

"Oh, yes? Well, take on here, Budworth, while I do a spot of telephoning. Watch that house and tell me if anything goes on."

Shut in the red box lower down the street, the inspector put through a London call. By the best of luck he found Dr. Ladbroke in, and for several minutes spoke succinctly. Over the wire came a long whistle.

"Surely not, Headcorn! Realise what you're suggesting?"

"Sounds far-fetched, I know. I don't lay claim to more than a cursory knowledge. It could happen?"

"Theoretically, yes—with given subjects, of course—but——"

"Then I've got to make certain. As it is now I'm getting badly hung up. You grasp the position, don't you?"

A brief silence. "It would mean manslaughter, surely."

"Manslaughter," said the inspector tersely, "can wreck any medical practitioner—if discovered."

Another pause. "I'm getting it. And you're stalled till this one person can be tackled. From what you've just told me I'd say you'd a fat chance of worming anything out of that old boy, protected as he is now."

"H'm, yes. . . . How positive were you about Boldre's heart?"

"I'd swear to its soundness in any witness-box," declared Colin firmly.

"That should be good enough. Still, this man's popular about here. He'll have authority on his side to crab any move I may make." As Headcorn said it he had a vision of the Chief Constable's iron jaw. "As it now stands, the doctor attending him assures me he can't be approached for another three weeks. What's that?" A sharp exclamation had impinged on the speaker's eardrum.

"Three weeks! Is that what you've been told? God, man, don't you see?"

"No. What's the point?"

Colin appeared to hesitate. "Here," he snapped. "I'll be down there by the last train. Meet me at Bewkesbury; and, hold on! Not a breath of this to Alison. . . ."

Slow pulses astir, the inspector beckoned his aide. Wedged in the booth, Budworth listened and stared.

"Malpractice? Coo! Well, from the amount of fire-water I watched that old buzzard swilling down in this pub last night I shouldn't put it past him. He's lying doggo now, though, not a crack out of him. Want me to stick round?"

"Let it go for the moment. It's his movements on Saturday I'd like a line on. Think we might wangle a look at his appointment-book?"

"Wait, sir. I seem to remember he was part of that bedridden farmer's alibi. You know. The chap Glover diddled over the cow?"

Headcorn consulted the superintendent's report on the three original suspects. Yes, Dr. Blount had been with the man Larch till just before six o'clock; and Larch's home was situated only half a mile from this village. Eagerly the inspector examined his chart of tyre-prints. The one set as yet unidentified revealed clear portions, carefully annotated.

"I doubt if that hand of his could have taken sure aim from a moving car. We'll have a look at his bus all the same."

The cinder path beside the house led to an unlocked garage, in which stood the dirty two-seater.

"The same right enough—and the tracks it made lay immediately under Kingsclere's." Headcorn repocketed his torch. "Still"—doubtfully—"it's not all plain sailing."

"Meaning you'll have to establish he pinched the major's revolver?"

"That, yes; but even tougher things. Well, one move at a time."

At ten of a bright morning, Colin Ladbroke pulled Dr. Blount's jangling bell, and doing so cast a sneak-thief glance over his shoulder at the placid village street. He had no wish to advertise this flying visit to Sompton. Whichever way the cat jumped, his meddling must place him in an invidious position. Though longing to see Alison, he meant to get this job over and catch the first London-bound train.

"Yes, sir?"

A sturdy maidservant, grubby with black-lead, was holding open the door. Colin nodded, strode authoritatively past her and made for the stairs.

"I know the room," said he firmly. "Don't bother to show me up."

The black bag and the professional manner had worked like a charm. The girl never doubted he was a partner deputizing for Dr. Cox. Alone on the cramped landing he shed both manner and bag. He tapped on a partly-open door and pushed tentatively into the room.

"Well, Doctor!" he said heartily. "What's this I hear about your being crocked up?"

His entrance had caused no flurry. The occupant of the bed lay very still, a mountainous hump under the covers. Had he been smoking? Round his head hung a bluish fog. His muddy eyes had slewed round, a queer gleam at the back of them. His unshaven jaw dropped.

"Just passing," breezed Colin. "Thought I'd call in and see how you were. Remember me, don't you? We met, you know, at Major Fitts's breakfast-party some few weeks ago."

The nonplussed expression altered to mild gratification. It made the coming task even more dastardly.

"Um, yes." Blount's deep rumble was fairly distinct. "Some girl with you, eh? Saw her the other day. Take a pew, Mr.——?"

So both name and medical connection had failed to register. Relieved, Colin drew an arm-chair close to the bed and sat down. His foot kicked over a quart bottle shrouded by the overhanging blanket. He righted it. Yes, White Horse—half full.

"And what's your damage, sir? Another sporting event?"

Mentally Colin said, *Rotten colour. Shot to pieces with drink. Damn it, the old ragamuffin may be paralytic . . .*

"No. No." Laboriously Blount moved his shaggy

head. " Little seizure. Right side. Pass off in time."

" My hat, I didn't realise ! Bad show."

The right hand, the skin of which might have told something, was well covered over.

" Tongue went for a bit," continued the sufferer, adding with sardonic humour, " Bad handicap, that. Have to swear at my patients."

" Oh, rather ! " Colin grinned. " Mind if I smoke ? "

Reaching the match-box he saw it—a blackened pipe-bowl, propped against the bed-side, hot fumes spiralling from its charred dottle. It lay on the doctor's useless side. To deposit it here would have been no mean feat . . .

" I was about to say . . . *God, Doctor, look out !* "

With a squib explosion the match-box, aflame, had dropped full on the deadened arm. There came a ripped oath, a vast and vigorous upheaval of bed-clothes.

" Whew, I'm sorry ! "

The blunderer had swept the firebrand to the carpet and was stamping on four extinct matches. He took shrewd observations, reseated himself, and spoke in an altered tone.

" Quick recovery, that. Torn it a bit, haven't you, Doctor ? Now, then ! " Colin's eye had turned steely. " Shall we have the truth concerning this neat little dodge ? "

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A FEROCIOUS glare. "What the blazes——?"

"Well, haven't I called your bluff? You'd forgotten I myself was a doctor. Forgotten, too, that I was Tom Boldre's friend. What you can't have known is that I had occasion to test his heart—and that I found it entirely normal, with a strong, regular beat. No, let me finish!" Colin went on with rapid incisiveness. "Here's what happened. Correct me if I'm wrong. Boldre went phut directly you gave him—very properly—that little squirt of anti-tetanus. You neglected, I assume, to make sure he'd been desensitised?"

"No!" roared the doctor. "I did ask. He swore to me he had after the last injection. What blasted right——"

"Then why—but no matter. You saw at once what had happened?"

"I—I couldn't be certain."

"Doctor, *you were certain.* All your behaviour goes to prove it. Here in a hunting country you've been used to administering this anti-toxin; so you knew all about it. Boldre's had it before?"

"Twice. Not lately."

"And the last occasion?"

Tormented silence. As though flayed on the raw the old man mumbled, "I hadn't the record with me. I was hunting, too, don't forget. Had my bag sent over."

"So you merely took Boldre's word. You can't be blamed for doing that; but why, in God's name,

didn't you instantly give him a dose of adrenalin? It would have saved his life."

"Bottle empty," groaned Blount. "I tried to rush some over from the Cottage Hospital. There wasn't—time . . ."

"Quite." Grimly Colin stood up. "That's all, Doctor. Inspector Headcorn is outside and will take any statement you may see fit to give him." With a curt nod he quitted the room.

On the doorstep the inspector met him eagerly.

"Did the storm-tactics work?"

"Oh, yes! Not that I'm feeling exactly proud. Poor devil! I doubt if he bothers to keep records—and his memory, of course, lets him down. He's been on the rack, and he deserves it—chiefly for criminal carelessness in the non-replenishment of drugs."

Briefly Colin outlined the story just given him.

"I see. So adrenalin would have pulled Boldre round?"

"An intramuscular injection, if done promptly enough. There was no adrenalin at hand."

Headcorn pondered. "In your view, then, both Boldre and Blount forgot that the latest dose of anti-tetanus serum hadn't been counteracted?"

"That's it. Quite understandable with one a child in arms over the danger and the other an habitual soak. I don't for one moment suppose that Tom Boldre had ever heard the term anaphylaxis. Certainly he never grasped the principle. For that matter, how many people do know of it? Darned few, I can tell you—which puts the bigger responsibility on Blount. What's wrong? Am I spoiling your book?"

Oddly perplexed in manner Headcorn merely said, "I'm infinitely obliged, Ladbroke. Now it's my innings." He edged through the door.

Colin looked about for Sergeant Budworth, who was to drive him to the station, but neither he nor the car was in sight. Suddenly, across the way, a pair of familiar figures captured his attention. The taller, a lean man, liverish and dismal, was the agent, Gregg. They were talking in earnest, subdued tones. At any moment they would look up.

Into a combination chemist's and tobacconist's shop Colin plunged. "Twenty Player's," he was saying when a shout brought him spinning round. There beside him was Wynn Marchmont. She seized on him with vigour.

"Of all the low hounds! Colin Ladbroke, were you trying to dodge me?"

Caught, God help him! The lie hastily concocted sounded just what it was; yet it seemed to go down. Fresh as paint, eyes a-sparkle under her brushed curls, Wynn nodded and took him in tow.

"Found after all you could snatch a day with us? Silly to bunk last night at that flea-bitten Bull and Crown when all you had to do was ring us up. Never mind, we'll forgive you. Jump in. That's my old bus, or rather Derek's, there by the door."

While she slung parcels in behind he sighted the sergeant and made furtive signs to him. In another moment he was being rattled away to the very place he had hoped to avoid.

"Alison's blooming," Wynn told him. "It's doing her good."

"I was about to say the same of you."

"Oh, it's one up on life in the suburbs!"

He blessed her nonchalance. Had she no idea——? Evidently none. Oppressed by the load on his conscience he hardly heard her as she ran lightly on.

"See, under our feet? I made Derek tack mat-

ting over that hole. By the gear-box—remember? We couldn't close a window because of the fumes. He's selling Tom's Bentley, so this old wreck must do him till he's raked together some cash. Here, look!"

She had slowed, and was jerking her head towards an innocent gap in the tall hedge bordering the lane.

"That's where It happened. Someone is supposed to have put that man Glover on the spot. Don't ask me who. Maybe your pal the inspector can tell you."

Some hours later Colin was at the wheel with Alison's head snuggled luxuriously into his shoulder. The very warmth of his welcome at Chenerys had made him long to escape. It was Wynn's tact which had managed this tête à tête drive.

"Darling, what a heavenly smell!" Alison sniffed his hair. "I'm glad we're having this little time together. Though aren't they dears? And hasn't Derek improved? Even though he's so cut up over losing his brother."

"You think he is?" asked Colin absently, and wondered why on earth he had said it.

"Why, yes! You have to see more of him to know, because of all that intense reserve. I've spotted it coming out when he thinks you're not noticing. A queer sort of almost conscience-stricken look——" No! That didn't sound right. "You understand, don't you? It's what you and I would feel if we'd got what we most wanted but hated paying the price. Like that awful story *The Monkey's Paw.*"

"Lord, you've a morbid mind!"

"Rubbish! Of course I don't mean anything so extreme." She stole a shrewd glance sideways. "Well, come across with it," she drawled. "What brought you down?"

"Your eyes. Couldn't remember what colour they were, amber or plain mud."

"Oh, yeah? And now I'm telling *you*. You sneaked along on the q.t. just to see your inspector. Wynn grabbed you, so you were obliged to play up. Haven't I hit it?"

Sighing heavily, he made a clean breast, too absorbed by his own preoccupations to notice her small, sharp gasp.

"I hated like hell doing the dirty on poor old Blount. Only who else was there who was in a position to show him up?"

"Pretty darned clever," said Alison flatly. "What was that word you just used?"

"Anaphylaxis? I once explained it to you, I think. The idea very roughly is this: Certain substances, if introduced into the bloodstream, give rise to certain conditions. Which conditions, being calculated to create immunity from definite toxins——"

"Stop! Wasn't there something about white of egg, and the second injection killing you?"

"White of egg and other things may kill on the second injection, provided there's been an interval of two clear weeks between doses, and nothing in the meantime done to counteract the first one. The counteraction is called desensitisation. It's done with minute doses of the same serum, or, in an emergency, by means of adrenalin."

"Yes. And how long does the desensitisation last?"

"Indefinitely, as far as we know. Here's the run of it: During the first fortnight, anyhow, a second injection can cause no damage. The subject is perfectly safe. Once that fortnight is passed, he can't risk another treatment of the same serum till he's been rendered immune."

"I'm getting it. Was there any good reason for Dr. Blount to give Tom this anti-tetanus serum?"

"The best of reasons. Tom's skin was broken. He'd got dirt in the wound; and these old, frequently-ploughed fields, tramped over by animals, are full of tetanus germs. If Tom had been cut or scratched the day you and I looked after him, as like as not I'd have got hold of some serum and plunked it into him. In which case," added Colin grimly, "I'd be his murderer, not Blount."

Into her head was hammering, *Two injections. There have to be two . . .*

Hastily she stammered, "You—you tell me the second injection *may* kill. Not a certainty, then?"

"It will depend on the subject's individual reactions. Generally speaking, there's rather more than a good sporting chance. That is why every doctor before injecting certain serums must be prepared——"

"Oh, oh!" She rocked herself. "And I spilled the beans!"

Colin stopped the car with a jerk. She had gone sickly white. Gripping her shoulders he said sternly, "Spilled what beans? Here, out with it."

"I told the inspector—about Derek. His being there with Tom, in that field. His looking so odd—his putting something away in his pocket . . ."

He shook her. "Rot! Of course he had the wind up. Tom might have broken his neck. What he was stuffing back was only his handkerchief. I didn't see it, but—what the devil! Are you thinking it might have been Derek and not Blount who jabbed in the other serum?"

"The inspector's thinking it," she moaned. "Oh, don't you realise? *It was just over the two weeks before Tom died.*"

Furiously he calculated. Yes, two weeks and a few days to spare. Suddenly sweat poured down his neck, soaking his soft collar. Here in full horror was a complication he had never remotely foreseen—worse, moreover, than Alison could guess. Tom had been completely unconscious. He would not have felt the stab of a needle.

Colin knew, if Alison didn't, that it was possible to obtain a neat little anti-tetanus ampoule, needle comprised, the whole outfit small enough to slip into a pocket. In fact, hardly bulkier than a fat fountain-pen. . . .

Irritably he said.

"Good God, girl, get rid of this insane notion! Can you see Derek Boldre taking such a cold-blooded, purely scientific means of stepping into his brother's shoes?"

She was not listening. In a voice that shook she described to him her whole difficult session with the inspector.

"He knew so much! And already, without meaning to, I'd provided him his cues. I wondered why he wanted me to show him exactly where Glover was when we first saw him coming towards us. Now—well, isn't that just the whole point?"

The whole point . . . yes, of course. Colin felt a searing anger against Headcorn, who had kept all these things dark—lured him here to do what in full knowledge he would never have done.

"There may," Alison whispered, "be any amount of tittle-tattle going on. People may suspect Derek of having killed Glover. I'm sure Arthur Kingsclere does."

"The tall, fair chap. There *is* an affair between him and Pat Boldre?"

"I'm certain of it. Oh, they're being terribly

discreet ! Wait ! Could it have been Kingsclere who gave that mysterious first injection ? "

He threw in his clutch. " See here, darling, you and I are working ourselves up quite unnecessarily. If Headcorn's satisfied this is Blount's doing and that Blount can't have shot Glover, he'll never dream of tampering with Tom's body. I offered to dig out the truth in the firm belief that only old Blount was to blame. What made me double sure was his professional pal's saying he couldn't be questioned for three weeks."

" Why ? "

" My dear girl, listen : In three weeks from now every distinctive appearance in Tom's body will have vanished. All the expert analysts in the world won't be able to tell us why his heart conked out. Blount knows that. He's got this other doctor to stand by him. And that, to my mind, is the best proof of Blount's innocence. If he'd been deliberately guilty of causing any one's death should I have got a word out of him ? "

Again her attention had strayed. " That day in the Glovers' bedroom, did you notice any needle-mark on Tom ? "

" No. A prick like that wouldn't have been very noticeable even if I'd been looking for it—which, of course, I wasn't. Roll up a sleeve . . . Now what ? "

" Only that—that I seem to remember Tom's cuff was turned back. That I saw Glover pulling it down."

" Why not ? He was examining that injured wrist. Here, get this into your head : Unless Derek Boldre has been buying anti-tetanus serum, no vague rumours can harm him. Here's a pub. I'm going to buy you a drink."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the gloom of the Bewkesbury platform the inspector sent Dr. Ladbroke a constrained glance.

"There will," he said, "have to be an exhumation."

Colin winced. "Why?" he barked rudely.

"Because I find there was a record of Boldre's last desensitisation. I turned up the note, made at the time and properly dated, in a cupboardful of old rubbish. The ink's old, so it's no fake."

"You think, then, the old scoundrel's sole fault was carelessness over the adrenalin?" Colin spoke absently, thinking hard.

"Quite. He got in a flat spin, held himself entirely responsible for his patient's death, and knew if the truth got out he'd be ruined. He's hunted high and low for that record. Not finding it he concluded the worst. Actually, it's impossible for him to have murdered Glover. When he drove along that lane he had a lame girl in his car. He'd picked her up in the village and was giving her a lift. He set her down near where he was going, five miles to the east. The case he went to was a baby one. He stopped away all night."

"Mightn't there have been yet a later injection he failed to note down?"

"It's faintly conceivable," admitted Headcorn, "though on a date soon after the last noted desensitisation he bucked up and began keeping quite creditable records, in a book. Yes, Blount's pretty well cleared. Now I must wait for the result of the

autopsy. If it's what we expect, I'll have to find out who in this district has been buying anti-tetanus."

All the talk with Alison returned to Colin with ugly significance. Slowly he said, " In case you don't know it, Headcorn, this particular serum can be bought over the counter in Wigmore Street, by just any one. No book to sign, no questions asked."

" There'll be difficulties, no doubt." With another glance Headcorn added, " I understand how you feel, friendly as you are with these people down here. All the same "—he paused, " you'll admit it was a very dirty sort of crime."

The train rounded the curve in a shower of fiery sparks.

" Intrinsically," commented the inspector's level voice, " it gives us the perfect method of killing. Maybe in this instance the one possible flaw has been eliminated by polishing off, unseen, the solitary eye-witness. And yet, I don't know . . ."

Pat stamped through the front door and into the lounge, flinging wide her arms in a gesture of freedom. To ride again, after so many dull, boring days ! In her own element at last, for the first moment since Tom's death.

" Free ! " Her bounding blood sang it. " Why, of course I'm free ! To do as I jolly well like——"

She jumped and chewed her underlip, thankful she had not spoken out loud. A tall man, blurred to her sun-dazzled eyes, had taken form out of the shadows.

" Oh," she murmured, " it's you, is it ? "

Coolly, still preserving caution, she ripped off her small bowler, cast it on the table, and dabbed with her handkerchief at her warm cheeks. She even took a cigarette from the silver box and was tapping it deliberately against her palm when the man

who should have been Arthur spoke in a stranger's voice.

"Mrs. Boldre, I believe?"

Pat felt a squirm in her inside. Match-box in hand she glared back, belligerently blank.

"Who're you?" she fired.

"Inspector Headcorn. I have something very important to say to you."

What the inspector saw was a handsome young woman, upstanding and correct in black riding-garb, staring at him with affronted dislike. Rather a stupid-looking young woman, with inky, knit brows, and a natural colour which had not faded at all.

"To me? What on earth for?"

"Perhaps you'd better sit down. This will prove distressing, I'm afraid."

She remained standing. "Well, get on with it," she jerked. "What's it all about?"

"It concerns your husband's death. Information received leads me to believe it was not due to natural causes, therefore——"

"Not natural——? *My* husband's death? Here, what is it you're trying to say?"

An embarrassing, yes, a most awkward business. Mrs. Boldre seemed so extraordinarily dense. Even when he had explained twice over, in infant-school language, she still wore the same uncomprehending frown.

"Post mortem? No! I won't hear of it. Why, you're mad! The whole idea's horrible——"

"Painful, I agree; but please understand the decision, unfortunately, doesn't rest with you. Can I persuade you that opposition on your part is only a rather futile barrier in the execution of justice?"

Blindly she sank down on the chair Headcorn had

drawn forward. Like a rude-mannered, unintelligent child she sat there, obstinately tearing her moist handkerchief into small shreds. When the inspector quitted her she seemed not to notice he was gone, her fingers still making those hard, vicious jerks.

Sergeant Budworth, at the lodge-gates, greeted his superior's remarks with a grin.

"A good-looker, all the same," he observed, "and cripes, can she ride! Did she answer any questions about the tall, blond sportsman?"

"I didn't ask any. What concerns us just now is that Boldre, according to her and the butler, was never attended by any doctor except Blount; and that never, to her knowledge or the butler's, was he unconscious, barring the single occasion on Glover's ground."

"Yes, but what about his getting blind?"

"That wouldn't serve. Ladbroke assures me it wouldn't, and I'm inclined to agree. Actually, I understand Boldre never passed out from drink. He drank lavishly, like all these people, but he had a strong head. You would have to be absolutely comatose not to know when a thick needle was jabbed into you."

Pat, meanwhile, had rung for a stiff whisky. She was holding the drained tumbler in her hand when her sister and Alison walked in with Derek. Under their amused stares she rose, unsteady and with a fixed, glazed scowl.

"Tom," she muttered, her voice oddly stifled.

Wynn studied her with hard irony and said, "Pat, you're tight."

It was Alison who took a quick step forward to rescue the sticky glass from its insecure clutch. "What's happened?" she whispered.

"Happened!" Pat gave a sudden, cracked laugh.

"They're going to open Tom's grave. Some lunatic thinks he was murdered."

"*Tom murdered?*" gasped Wynn.

Pat was making discordant noises; but now they dried up as brusquely as they had begun, and the room held a dead hush.

Derek didn't drop the decanter he had picked up. He set it down carefully, yet its faint *ting* as it touched the oak table had all the force of a pistol-shot.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WYNN found voice. "Exhume Tom? But why?"

"I've told you. Some fool says——"

"Who says what? Here, Pat, look at me! Not—*poisoned*?"

"Call it that, I suppose. They think it was anti-tetanus. Some rigmarole about his having two doses—and the second one killing him. It's nonsense, of course, but I can't stop them."

"Two——?" Wynn looked at Derek and back at her sister. "Pat! Do you think——?" She gripped the black-sleeved arm.

Pat tore away from her. "How do I know? If old Blount says it . . . oh, leave go, blast you! I want my bath."

Silence again as Pat, lurching very slightly, clumped up the stairs in her draped riding-skirt Alison grew conscious of the heavy scent of the hyacinths in the room, of the mingling of stale smoke and the whisky-fumes from the tumbler still clasped in her hand.

Wynn muttered, "We weren't here, of course," and raked stiff fingers through her curls. She added, "Pat would never know a—a thing like that. I've heard of it, though. That is, I know it could happen." She sought aid of Derek. "Who?" she demanded. "And if Blount had this idea, why has he waited till now to speak of it?"

No answer. More insistently Wynn said, "Derek! Did *you* know Tom was given any injection?"

Derek shook his head. For the first time he stirred,

with effort, as though his whole wire-drawn body had grown numb.

"I'd better find out." Without looking at them he left the house.

Rooted in the same spot, Wynn picked at the hard knot of her tie. "That was what your inspector wanted," she remarked presently. "You remember his car passed us in the road."

Alison could bear no more. Colin's part she could hide, but not hers. She burst out, "Oh, Wynn, it's my doing, all of this! Let me tell you."

Her story rushed out, thorough, detailed.

A pause, and then Wynn spoke in tones level, understanding.

"Of course. Don't be stupid. Do you think I blame you? He was bound to find certain things out. But there's no reason," she continued, "to hand any of this on to Pat."

"No," said Alison quickly. "And for that matter I shall go home—now. On the night train."

She started for the stairs. Wynn detained her.

"Why? I—I hope you won't do anything so silly. Pat will think—can you blame her?—you just don't want to be mixed up in an unpleasant situation. And another thing," Wynn added it under her breath, ashamedly, "with you here, Pat will be less likely to—to say anything that—that could lend itself to misconstruction."

It was the first reference to knowledge common to both their minds. Alison saw the point and nodded, avoiding Wynn's eyes.

"Let's change," said Wynn sensibly. "After all, there's really no more to be said, is there? At least, not now."

It seemed, though, that there was, for a little later, while Alison was running her bath, Wynn came into

the big bedroom and shut the door softly behind her. She had a small red comb in her hand, and as she stood talking she yanked it cruelly through her curls.

"By the way," she began, too carelessly. "Has Colin told you about how this anti-tetanus stuff works?"

Alison gave the information, making desperate efforts to use scientific detachment. Once, when the fortnight interval was mentioned, the red comb arrested, poised. Only for a half-second. Then it went on with its task.

"I see," observed Wynn coolly. "Odd, don't you think, that nothing seems to be known about the revolver that killed Glover?"

Alison glanced at her, startled. Wynn's mind was moving rapidly.

"Nothing, I suppose, except the calibre. Someone told us—Major Fitts, was it?—the bullets belonged to a .45."

"Yes, a Colt's .45. Every one knows that now." Wynn frowned hard at her reflection and drew a neat side-parting along her head. "Well," she remarked, "Derek sold his revolver ages ago."

"Tom had one, I imagine?" asked Alison, and straightway could have bitten her tongue.

"Yes, a Colt's .48. It's in the table-drawer, in the office. And Gregg's revolver happens to be a Smith and Wesson .32."

Once again Alison found nothing to say.

Suddenly the girl at the mirror dug the comb deep into her waves and left it there. She was listening.

"That's Derek." Abruptly she went out.

Derek was just turning in from outdoors. Wynn went close to him and asked. "Well, what have you found out?"

"Nothing much. Just that they're holding a post-mortem. Stafford's wild, of course."

"He would be. Is it because of what Dr. Blount's said?"

"So one gathers."

Why didn't he say anything? Just wooden, eyes fixed on a spot past her shoulder.

"Then it was this inspector who got Blount to admit things? It was! Which means——"

But why put it into speech? Derek was no fool. He knew, just as she did, the one way in which Tom's death could be linked up with the shooting of Glover.

Dryly she said, "Well, let's keep our shirts on, shall we? Ten to one old Blount's been hitting the bottle too hard."

"Drunk or sober," said Derek, "I'd say his medical stuff's fairly prehistoric."

She would have liked it better if Derek had shown greater willingness for discussion. Still, knowing him—she repeated this to herself rather insistently—she let him be and went slowly upstairs.

When the butler came through the baize door to collect ashtrays and reassemble the lounge, he found Gregg, holding an opened letter in his hand and exploring with tentative, lack-lustre eyes.

"Mr. Derek back?" the latter inquired.

Padgett, drawing the curtains, did not turn as he answered, "He may be, sir. I heard someone go up."

It was an off-hand reply, the discourtesy of which Gregg seemed to expect.

"No notion, I suppose, what the detective-chap wanted?"

"Not the slightest." Padgett padded flat-footedly to the next window.

"I see," observed the agent, and moved away through the open front door.

Alison, about to descend, heard muted remarks passing between the butler and Bessie, the nice, middle-aged maid. As she paused, she could see them both peering out of the farthermost window, which gave on the shrubbery across the drive.

"Old Sour Apple, yes," Padgett was murmuring. "He got no change out of me. Now see where he's heading. Hopes Major Fitts'll have the whole ins and outs of the business, wotever it may be. As I dessay he will!"

Bessie clicked her tongue with brief scorn. "Them two! Forever hobnobbing. Couple of old hens . . ."

Headcorn pushed open the door of the small mortuary. Two quiet forms in linen overalls were just shrouding what lay long and bulky on a table.

"And the result?" he asked steadily.

Sir Brian Warner, the Home Office pathologist, turned, nodded a greeting, and began to strip off his rubber gloves.

"Not so simple as last time, eh, inspector? That was arsenic, I believe. This affair is quite an unusual pair of shoes—and I congratulate you for spotting it."

"Then it wasn't too late?"

"Oh, Lord no! A queer business altogether, though whether criminal in the ordinary sense——" The big man lifted the sheet and took a last look at the corpse's pallid features. "Heart!" he said. "Well, depend on it, Inspector, no normal accident stopped that organ's functioning. Your hunch was correct."

The police surgeon splashed water into a basin and started washing his hands. Slightly sick—

excitement, or was it the stench of disinfectant ?—Headcorn listened while Sir Brian recited his findings.

" Hyperæmia of the liver. Lungs, acute emphysemea. That's to say, blown right out. Bleeding in the suprarenal bodies ; ulcers in the duodenum. Fairly complete."

" And to sum up——— ? "

" Why, beyond a vestige of doubt, a typical anaphylactic reaction ! This poor chap died as the direct outcome of receiving, without intervening desensitisation, two full doses of anti-tetanus serum."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE dragging sounds came from Wynn's room. Pushing the door inward Derek asked, " What the devil are you up to ? "

The bed was jumbled with garments. Over the lid of a suitcase Wynn glared as though caught.

" Packing," said Derek evenly. " I see."

" Why not ? " Busily she rolled up a peach-tinted chemise. " I shall have to get back, you know."

" Quite." He turned quietly away.

Her face worked. " Derek ! Come here."

" Well ? "

Now he faced her she found nothing to say. What unnerved her worst was the sight of his eyes, burnt out again, as they had been for so long until just the last few days.

He spoke gently. " Don't tie yourself into knots, my dear. I understand."

" Oh, but you don't ! " It burst from her in anguish. " Derek, surely you must realise why I'm going ? "

" Certainly." His tone was still colourless. " It's Pat. The bombshell she exploded this evening about that revolver. Funny her utterly casual way of bringing it out. Just as a riotously amusing item. '*It seems,*' " he mimicked, " ' *Fred had two men-friends with him when his revolver disappeared, just before Glover was shot.*' I sometimes wonder, can she really be so dense ? "

" You must listen, dear ! " Wynn took him

firmly by the lapels. " I've got to make it look as though I wasn't the tiniest bit worried. As though you meant nothing especial to me. Thank God," she said fervently, " no one can actually say otherwise. Except Allison, and she, of course, doesn't count. Oh, I know that damned inspector may have got some notion of our being engaged, but it's not official ; and if I just get quietly back to my job he may think differently."

" So the fact of my wanting rather desperately to marry you needn't tip the balance in the way of a motive ? I'm afraid, my dear, you're locking the stable after the horse is out."

He hadn't understood. She shovelled up a handful of oddments and stuffed them into the suitcase. Not raising her eyes she whispered :

" Was the other man Arthur ? " He did not reply. " I knew it," she said swiftly. " So what ? " She waited with held breath.

" How the hell do I know ? " he muttered.

She nodded. " It's beastly, but we've got to face this out. If Tom was killed, the person who gave him that first injection can only have been someone very close to him. Someone Tom trusted—*someone who wanted Tom out of the way*. Does it leave us much choice ? "

He winced. It goaded her on to plainer speech.

" Why not Arthur ? He's off his head about Pat. I told you how both Alison and I heard Pat refusing point blank to go away with him. She meant it, too. She was like a stone wall."

" Yes. And just when could Arthur have dug a needle into Tom without hell being raised ? Or any one else, except me that time Tom was knocked out ? "

" Don't you see," Wynn persisted, " what we've

got to concentrate on is Glover. Where was he before you saw him ? "

" I haven't a notion. He was coming from the trees."

" Well, he may have been snooping for some time. There's a lot of underbrush to hide behind."

" You seem very well informed."

His tone brought scarlet to her cheeks. " Of course. I went along there this morning to make sure. Oh, I took jolly good care no one saw me, so don't worry about that ! "

" I'm sure you did." Again that dry sarcasm. " Well, and whoever shot Glover was equally cautious not to be seen. It may save him from hanging ; but by the same token it will let the public think what it likes without contradiction."

She cast up her hands. " But who in his senses could think it was you ? It's too utterly fantastic to consider ! "

His silence was another wound in raw flesh. " Fool ! " she lashed. " It just can't happen." Feverishly she got back to her packing. " You'll see. Somewhere, somehow, there's a scrap of real evidence. Tangible evidence—you know ? And this inspector's bound to get hold of it."

Had she struck something at last ? Derek had moved towards the door, but now he turned, holding some inward debate. She watched him. He came within three feet of her and spoke with an effort.

" You'd better have the worst of this now. The fact is, I had a small ampoule of anti-tetanus serum. Bought it last autumn after hearing of some poor devil dying in agonies of lockjaw for want of proper attention. I left it here in my room."

All the blood in her body drained away. " Derek ! Where is it now ? "

"Gone. Don't ask me when. I'd forgotten the damned thing."

Her gay dressing-gown tagged limply from her shoulders. For long moment her eyes searched his.

"I see," she said stoically. "Well, shall you tell the inspector?"

"If he asks me. No"—with finality—"don't start wondering who took it. I didn't discover it was missing till last night; and this house is like a railway station, as you know."

He was back at the door, fidgeting to be gone, and she found herself too stunned to detain him.

Over his shoulder he said, "Try to get some sleep." Her arms were outstretched in appeal. He did not see them. Softly the door closed. She heard him walking down the passage to his room.

A sob tore her throat. She stood staring down at the clothing on the bed as though wondering how it had got there. Slowly she became aware of an unfinished grey pullover with scarlet needles stuck in it. Something inside her snapped. She crumpled the knitting against her convulsed face and held it there.

"Oh, darling, darling!" she muttered. "It's got to be done! Now, while there's time, I've got to cut myself adrift. Snap out of it. Make out there's never been anything between us. It may make all the difference. Particularly after what he's just told me."

The syringe-thing. Who had taken it? Where was it now? Her mind stuck petrifiedly round the new and appalling problem. As Derek had said, there was not the smallest good speculating. If it was the ampoule used on Tom, by now it would be broken to bits, washed down a drain—or cast into the dregs of the river Severn. It would never turn up . . .

Who was going downstairs?

Wide-eyed in the darkness she heard the tell-tale squeak of the second step. The luminous dial of her watch showed a few minutes past two . . . There! That muffled thud was the front door.

Out of her room she flew to the landing window. Everywhere was dark, but there was no mistaking the quiet, lithe movement of the figure just crossing the drive into the rhododendrons. Derek, sleepless as she was, going out for air. In less than three minutes she was out of the house, in her old beige camel's-hair coat, her crêpe rubber soles making no sound. Ghost-like she slipped into the rhododendron path. In and out it wound, the dense foliage soaring high above her head.

Derek had disappeared. Completely. She could not hear any movement; but then the gravel was soft from a shower, and on the grass beyond the shrubbery the heaviest tread would be muffled. She was racing. Why?

"Idiot!" A twig caught her hair. She tore savagely free. "Am I trying to follow him?"

In the wide open space she paused. A still, dead hush. Utter blackness. She might have been deep down in some airless coal mine. The gloom seemed palpable—a funeral garment she could touch. It smothered. And she had lost her bearings.

Angrily she pushed on, and soon felt rough tussocks underfoot. Now she knew where she was. To the right would be Gregg's house. No light in it, of course. Without knowing why she steered in its general direction, listening; but again she heard only the vague night sounds.

She must keep clear of the brook. She heard the whisper of the water sucking and rippling over the flat stones. The matted grasses held her. She yanked her feet out of the viscuous mud in which

they were bedded, cursing under her breath. There, that bit was passed! A strip of orchard, and now, ahead of her, stretched straight lines of poplars. They bordered the long path leading across meadows to the lane and to the Glovers' farmland beyond.

The path was dry, firmly-trodden. She could even see it, almost white, a ribbon in front of her. Overhead the new leaves shuddered in the tiny breeze that was beginning to rise. That meant the short night would soon be coming to an end.

What was that horrid, worrying noise? Furtive, nearly stumbled upon . . . Stupid! Only Gregg's Airedale. Eating something filthy, snarling and covering his prize—a decomposed rabbit's head. She spoke sharply to him: "Jock, go home!" Her own voice in all that desolation made her uncomfortable. She laughed. The sound was stranger still.

Looking up she spied it. A red spark on the path twenty yards in front, winking at her, a small, fiery beacon. Someone's cigarette stump, only lately thrown down.

She had picked it up. Only a third consumed, the glow from the tip making visible its pale red lettering. There was just one person here who smoked Mild Player's.

Yet no sign of Derek when she had reached the hedge and squeezed through the gap. She waited, within sight of the other, wider gap where Glover's mutilated corpse had lain, straining her ears. At last she began her slow homeward plod.

She could not face bed. Cold now—were her teeth actually chattering?—she huddled on a window-seat in the silent lounge, tucking cushions over her bare, wet ankles. She would wait here. Little creakings in the old timbers. What a loud tick the tall clock made!

Three had struck some time before she heard the slight grate of a latch and knew her vigil was over. Steps crossed the floor, turned into the dining-room. Liquid gurgled. Derek was pouring himself a drink.

But why hadn't he turned on a light ?

It was this thought which held her enchained till, up above, that second stair squeaked. She caught the stealthy closing of a door . . .

" Bessie ! *Who's* been done in ? "

Heavy-eyed, Wynn stared at the maid from under her penthouse of curls.

" Why, miss, that there Mrs. Glover ! Bashed something cruel, head all swaddled in her husband's old hunting-jacket. Cottage ploughed to bits . . My word, the muck on your shoes ! "

" Glover's wife ! Not—*dead* ? "

" Maybe. And her all alone for the last time. Had her auntie coming to-day. Come, drink your tea."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CONSTABLE DAWKINS shook his big sheep's head. "Barely alive. I did think as how she'd pegged out on us."

He picked his way over wildly-strewn rubbish and spat carefully into the sink. Superintendent Mitcham said nothing. Inspector Headcorn raised his brows.

Dr. Cox came out of the bedroom. "No deep fracture," he announced brightly. "Bled a lot, of course. She's conscious now. Don't question her for another hour or so. I'll send in the district nurse." He got into his sky-blue car. "Oh, by the way," he shouted back. "It was done with those tongs. She'd taken them to bed with her, if that's of any interest."

The three officers stared down at the heavy iron implement, laid on a newspaper spread on the kitchen table. Into the sticky mess of crimson round the knob were glued a few black hairs.

"Think she may have been afraid it might happen?" mused the superintendent. No one answered, but the farm lad edged fascinatedly in at the door. "Williams, you say you discovered her. Was she able to say much?"

"Only that she never saw who done it. Then she went off again."

"And have you any idea what was stolen?"

"Why, nothink, sir—barring only them oddments in the shell-box by the bed."

Headcorn knew the shell-box. Its contents con-

sisted—at least a few days ago—of valueless trinkets. A bangle hung round with lucky pigs and like charms; a mouldy hair-brooch, a broken cuff-link, a Girl Guide's badge . . . Yet even in the attic the hoardings of trunks hurled about, seemingly pulled to bits! His own search had been thorough. Budworth, entering, read his thoughts. He whispered:

"Whatever it was, it's gone now."

From the bedroom a faint voice called plaintively for tea. Williams made it. The inspector carried it in.

"Think you can answer a few questions?"

Meg Glover lay in the huge, rudely-posted bed. Her head was a dome of white gauze, her child's body covered to the armpits by a faded green quilt, and above this a sleazy printed nightgown which hardly preserved decency. The inspector raised her a little, wedging a second pillow in place. One eye was a mere slit between purple bruises. The other, green and baffling, gazed forth as undaunted as before.

"I'll try," she murmured obligingly. The good eye closed. She nursed her cup of tea. "I can't tell you what time it was. I thought it was mice. There came a flash in my eyes. Then something knocked me out. I didn't know anything more."

He watched her closely. "You're positive you saw nothing?" She shook her bandaged head. "Nothing at all? Any indication of who——"

"I smelled whisky. On his breath. It was the last I knew."

"You can't possibly make a guess at the hour?"

"I felt I'd been asleep a long while. That it must be getting towards morning. Of course, I don't know."

That was her story. Not one item was to be added or altered.

"Except about the tongs," said Headcorn to the superintendent. "You heard, though, what she said about them? That it was only a general nervousness about being here all alone. That there wasn't, of course, anything worth stealing." He looked dryly round.

"Well, it's all damned odd."

Odder than Mitcham supposed. Headcorn knew if the others didn't that Meg Glover was frightened within an inch of her young life. Still terrified. He had seen the glint of it in her eye. And yet that eye was intrepid. If she had held out on him before, she was doing it now all the more determinedly.

"See here," he began, but closed down. Someone was arriving. The officer with the fingerprint outfit?

Major Fitts clumped into the kitchen.

"What's all this nonsense?" he barked. "What's Sompton coming to? Murders, burglaries . . ." His tone changed. "What I really mean is, how's that poor woman? Alive, is she?"

The sight of the major was a sore trial. Obviously he was on hand to pick up information apt to be withheld from the public; and Headcorn answered tersely, feeling that till this member of a bone-idle gentry could be removed work would be held up.

"Hah! Blasted queer . . ." Fitts's nose twitched like a terrier's. One hand whipped an eyeglass into place. "Burnt paper, what?" He made a pounce on the huge iron pot.

"If you don't mind, major. Fingerprints, you know."

"Eh? Good God, I'd forgotten! You don't want

me fouling your trail. Any harm my looking in on Mrs. Glover ? " he ventured, shamefaced.

" Not at all, sir ; only, hands off ! "

The major guffawed over the jest and stumped into the bedroom. Those behind heard him delivering a few kindly-abrupt questions, to which there were soft-voiced replies, and presently a protest.

" Stiff pull of whisky, my girl," advised the visitor. " Nonsense ! Just you hang on to that. You'll want it."

Want it ? Want what ? As Headcorn turned a listening ear the superintendent whispered, " See how he went for that burnt paper ? Knows something. Didn't I say so ? "

The fingerprint man arrived. " Pot first," directed Headcorn, and watched while the major's five clear prints received their coating of thick powder. He was thinking that the victim of assault probably realised last night's search had been futile, and that this accounted for her irritating composure.

The major bustled back. " See here, you chaps ! Is it a fact only those few trinkets were taken ? "

" We can't yet say for certain, sir," answered the inspector. " Before you go, would you mind letting us take your prints ? "

" What ? " The man's expression was vaguely startled. " Oh, yes, yes, to be sure ! My infernal meddling just now. Of course, how's it done ? "

He submitted to the operation with absorbed interest. As he washed his inky fingers at the sink fresh moisture broke out on his rubicund forehead. The group of policemen waited pointedly. He took the hint.

" Er—most extraordinary ! More mystery for you, what ? Sorry to be using up so much of your valuable time. I'll just buzz along."

"On his rounds," added the sergeant softly. He watched the spick and span Ford jolting out of the rutted farmyard. "Chenerys for a start? Then there'll be Sompton Hall. Oh, he'll manage quite a number of calls before lunch!"

The superintendent grinned. "They know about this at Chenerys. Gregg got word somehow. He was here at seven."

"Who informed Major Fitts? It's still quite early."

"Oh, that's easy, Inspector! Dawkins rooms with Mrs. Hargrave's married sister. She's ill, and Mrs. Hargrave is sleeping there this last night or so, Dawkins?"

"That's so, sir; and she was just getting off to Yew Lodge when young Len knocked me up with the news."

Headcorn re-entered the bedroom and closed the door behind him. On the quilt lay a new, crackling five-pound note. The widow fingered it, pouting.

"Very kind, I'm sure," she murmured. "But would you like taking it when all that's wanted is a good story to pass on to his friends?"

"What sort of story?" asked the inspector keenly.

She sent him an odd little glance. "You heard him. He doesn't believe this was just an ordinary burglary. That's what he'll say. It might give wrong ideas."

Taking a chair by the bed the inspector leant forward, resting heavy fists on his knees.

"See here, Mrs. Glover: If wrong ideas get about, whose fault will it be but yours? Of course last night's affair was no ordinary burglary. No one is better aware of that than you. Now, then, what did that unseen person hope to find?"

Tears welled into her eyes. "How should I know, Inspector? I—I've come over a bit faint."

"I'm warning you, that's all." His jaw squared ominously. "Get this into your head: Another time you may not be let off so lightly. What about being trussed up, burnt with a red-hot poker, forced to speak? And then finished off, to prevent further squealing?"

She went a sicklier drab. And then her expression subtly altered. Her pale lips twitched.

"Auntie'll be here. Wait till you've seen her," she gibed.

Levity was the last straw. The attractive green eye held his stern stare like a cat's. It followed his straying glance to the chimney, from which a heap of soot had been dislodged. Meg Glover giggled.

"Len says he washed himself at the sink. The soap was all black."

Bested, Headcorn withdrew. If he had stayed longer he might have shaken her.

"What's that?"

Budworth dumped a dripping ball of cotton material on the table. It fell with a chink. "Raked out of the duckpond in the yard, sir. Lying right in the edge."

Inside a handkerchief marked G.G. was the entire contents of the rifled box. Headcorn sorted the articles with disgust—charm bangle, hair-brooch, every item he remembered.

"Same tactics we had with the revolver." The superintendent pinched his lower lip. "Are we dealing with a lunatic?"

Budworth said, "Either he doesn't bother a rap, or else he's dead set on advertising the nature of his visit. Think he examined this lot outside and just chucked it away?" He trailed his chief into the

yard. "No car, sir, as you see. We'd have got good tracks in this mud. Other marks, though. What do you make of them?"

Parallel tracks, long shapeless slitherings. They began at the road and skirting the pond led up to the kitchen door. As though made by snow shoes. Yard by yard the men followed them.

"Feet wrapped round to disguise the soles," declared the superintendent, leading the way. "Not much doubt of it. Four tracks—two pairs. Yes, and the wrappings were removed in the middle of the tarred surface," he called back from the road.

Joining him, Headcorn picked up a few cotton shreds. None was more than an inch long. They were white, flaky and crumbling.

"Ravellings from a torn Turkish towel. Torn into strips and folded round and round his feet—a towel that's been washed for years on end would fray like this. Well, we may be able to discover what household's minus a bath-towel."

"But what, sir, was it all about?" persisted the sergeant. "Going to do any more hunting?"

Headcorn's eye travelled slowly over the out-houses. "Yes," he said grimly. "This time with a tooth-comb."

Hours of search, outside and in, came to nothing. Indeed, during the whole of that exasperating day only one thing brought encouragement. It was a report delivered by one of the superintendent's men. Headcorn nodded with satisfaction, and as it was now late took his way back to Bewkesbury for a hasty meal.

In the lobby of the Bull and Crown he found Miss Marchmont awaiting him. She rose, slightly furtive and yet defiant, her shoulders straight in their well-

tailored brown tweeds, her grey eyes piercingly bright but encircled by dark smudges. She spoke quickly and in a low, husky voice, trying to achieve matter-of-factness.

" Inspector Headcorn ? You remember me, I see. Might I have a word with you ? "

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the inspector's own room she took the chair covered with bogus tapestry.

"Thanks. It's only about the inquest on my brother-in-law. I understand it's been adjourned for further evidence. Is that so?"

"Quite. And——?"

"'Shall I be required as a witness? If not—well, I ought to be getting back to my job, you know. It's in London. I came down to be with my sister over the funeral. I really can't afford any more time off."

Headcorn looked at her thoughtfully. She had not, he recalled, been at Sompton when Boldre died. Still it was what went before that counted. . . .

"I suppose we could get you back if it was deemed advisable?"

"Oh, certainly! You can reach me by telephone at this address." She handed over a card. At the bottom ran the line, *Joscelyn Riding School, Wimbledon Common*. She added, unnecessarily, "I've never lived here, you know. I just manage an occasional week-end."

She had thin, strong hands, burnt almost nut-brown. He noticed them as she fidgeted with her suède gauntlets. Something more was coming. He waited.

"Oh, by the way, Inspector!" Real colour was pulsing from under her rouge. "I'm told you're taking an interest in what happened last night up at Boxtree Farm. Does that mean you don't consider it was just a common or garden burglary?"

Evasively the inspector murmured that it was a little early to pronounce judgment on the affair. She watched him sharply. Her chin went up with a trifle more defiance.

"I see," she laughed. "You're not giving anything away, are you? I believe though I've hit the mark. Otherwise, why should you take a hand in what would be dealt with by our local police? Well, this is what I've heard: That it's the theory Mrs. Glover was attacked by the same person who killed her husband. That whoever it was believed she was holding on to some damaging evidence, intending to use it, I suppose; and that this was what he hoped to find and destroy."

He smiled back at her. "You seem to have been hearing a good deal."

"Are you surprised? You can't stop gossip in a place like this, Inspector. One way or another nearly everything seeps through. Sorry, I should have known I wouldn't get any change out of you. I give up." She laughed again, ruefully, and got to her feet.

"Before you go, Miss Marchmont, I have a question to ask you. Did you notice anything unusual last night—any one moving about late in the house or in the grounds at Chenerys?"

"How odd that you should ask me that, Inspector! Because as it happens I was awake until four or five this morning, couldn't sleep, and I never heard a sound. My room's right at the head of the stairs, and you can take it from me we were all safe indoors the whole of last night!" She essayed a light laugh.

"As to that, Miss Marchmont, we happen to know differently. You can't have been as wide awake as you thought."

"What do you mean?"

"Between two-thirty and three this morning someone from your household was seen about fifty yards from Boxtree Farm."

"Who?" she demanded.

"Mr. Derek Boldre."

Her face flamed. "It's impossible! A mistake. He simply wasn't out of the house. I know."

"I'm afraid there can be no mistake about it. He was seen and recognised by someone who knows him quite well, in fact, he spoke to him."

He saw shame, dismay and sheer, hideous sickness pass over her face.

"I'm sorry," he said, "this must, of course, be specially upsetting to you."

"Why specially to me?" she asked sharply.

"Well, as Mr. Boldre's future wife——"

"Me?" She frowned at him and broke into a ringing peal of merriment. "Oh, Inspector, this is too much!"

"It isn't true? Then I humbly apologise."

"No need." Magnificent her recovery. "Shall I tell you something?" Her eyes danced. "He's not once asked me to marry him. That's a confession if you like. I suppose I'm too much of a sister. A fatal error, I'm beginning to think."

He measured her Spartan front, her tough pride. The laughter died down.

"Well," she challenged, "what are you proposing to do?"

"Really, Miss Marchmont! Justice, I trust. Certainly nothing hasty."

"No. It would hurt your reputation, wouldn't it?" Her eyes met his coolly. "Well, I won't say how utterly ridiculous it is to imagine Derek Boldre has any connection with these affairs. Still, I'm no

fool. I can guess how you're trying to fit things together. You assume Derek had a motive for getting rid of his brother. Listen : Have you thought of other motives ? Yes, and opportunities, for all we know, for giving my brother-in-law an injection ? For that, and for Glover's murder. Quite a number of people could have taken Major Fitt's revolver. Think that over, won't you ? "

She wrenched the door open for herself and bolted into the dim passage.

Budsworth appeared, looking curiously behind.

" My word ! " He rubbed his shoulder. " What was it ? Female of the species protecting its young ? "

" With tooth and claw. She came here on purpose to sound me out about Boldre. On the face of it, that looks bad. Also, she's anxious I should nose into her sister's affair with young Kingsclere."

" Well, we're doing our best in that direction, aren't we ? Not that it looks promising. I was about to tell you I've just left the super, and that he's licking his wounds."

" Oh, then he's been along to Sompton Hall ? "

" Seen the housekeeper and the butler. Old ironclads, both. Son and heir may quite easily have gone out in the early-morning hours, but will any one admit hearing him ? No bloody fear ! "

Budworth reflected.

" You know, I wonder you bother with Kingsclere," he drawled. " Haven't you got this other fellow pretty well in the bag ? Why don't you apply for a warrant ? "

" I like my cases complete."

" Complete ! " The sergeant stared round. " Oh, I see. You want to get your claws on the actual hypo outfit Glover saw Boldre using. Now, that *would* be

nice!" Heavily sarcastic he asked. "You don't think it's *that* little Green Eye's keeping up her sleeve?"

Out of a trance the inspector said, "No. No, it can't possibly be the syringe itself."

"Well, whatever it is, she's managed to hide it where we'll never find it. Cheer up, sir. You've got your cotton ravellings to fall back on."

"Right now." Full of action again, the inspector reached his hat. "Grab a sandwich and let's step on it. Chenerys' first."

Wile and guile went into the quest now undertaken. Servants must not guess what was being sought. However when various Hoovers and rubbish receptacles had yielded up their store without revealing one shred like those stowed in the inspector's match-box, it was possible to inquire what, if any, towels were missing. None were, if the firm statements received could be credited. Gregg had no resident servant to consult. He was off the premises, his gabled dwelling unlocked, so that it was a simple matter to look through it; but there was nothing for their pains.

"Means the tearing up of the towel was done near the Glover place." Budsworth gloomed round at the Chenerys' garden, richly abloom in the dusk. "And we may take it every rag was burned in some quiet spot and stamped to ashes."

"Looks like it," admitted Headcorn reluctantly. He was loth to abandon so tempting a clue. Boldre had not been carrying a parcel when he was seen in the early hours. He must therefore have had the towelling stuffed in the pocket of the old Burberry he had been wearing. Some frayed particle would probably have clung to the lining of that pocket. Undecidedly he glanced towards the house, and as

he did so his eye was caught by a light in one of Gregg's windows. "Wait outside in the car," he said to his companion. "I'll just have a word with this man Gregg."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE dinner-gong was sounding when Wynn stole guiltily into the lounge. Pat, boredly sipping a White Lady, stared hard at the rouge on her cheeks.

"Why, what on earth have you been up to?"

From the stairs Wynn called back, "Oh, shopping! Don't wait."

She ran into Derek. He also stared. She pushed him into her room and leant against the closed door.

"I'd better warn you," she said breathlessly. "It's that detective. Be ready for a visit."

His eye quickened. "Anything fresh?"

"I don't know. That is . . . oh, Derek, my sweet, why did you have to go mooching about last night? And up at Glover's place, too. Some idiot saw you."

He nodded. "Kingsclere's gamekeeper? Quite, I had a word with him. Here, what's the idea?"

She simply could not say it; but already she had seen understanding dawn. He fingered his aged black tie. Presently he put the question she had known he would ask.

"Who told me? Oh, the inspector. He didn't say it was Jarvis. Don't scowl at me, Derek! I—I just happened to run into him and thought I'd find out if there was any reason my sticking round till the second session of that inquest. One thing led to another."

"One thing," he repeated. "So you told him no one left this house during the night? I see. You needn't answer." His tone was hard. "Unfortunate, but——" He shrugged. "I dare say it won't in the long run make any vast difference."

His stoicism wounded her more than the most biting reproach.

"Go on," he bade. "Let's have it all. What made you think the Glover business linked up?"

"Fred Fitts. You weren't about when he came round."

"Oh!" He thought this over. "Well, what did he say?"

"Only hints the first time. Later on he'd been talking with Joe Dawkins. He told Pat and me there'd evidently been a search, but that whatever it was the burglar wanted hadn't been found. The Glover woman can't say when it happened or who did it. Fred seemed relieved about that. At the same time—well, I felt he didn't quite want to run into you." She must pin Derek's attention. "I felt, too, he was trying to prepare me."

"Prepare *you*?"

"So I could give you the warning, as I'm doing now. It mayn't mean a thing. I expect he's been doing the same with Arthur."

Derek said detachedly, "I haven't set eyes on Fitts for days. Odd! And I had the idea I was dodging him, not that it was the other way round . . . Well, shall we eat?"

Why didn't he take her in his arms? She was aching for just that. He held the door open for her as though nothing had ever been between them. When she touched his arm in mute appeal he still did not lay so much as a fingertip on her. Once only he spoke.

"Now I see," he remarked dryly, "why you didn't catch your train."

The inspector settled into Gregg's one arm-chair. "Just a general chat. I'm talking with as many

old residents as I can. How long, by the way, have you held this post ? "

" Since the war." Gregg sank drearily on the settle and began stoking his pipe. " I was gassed, you know, and left with a hole in my side you could put both fists into. In short, not fit for anything but an open-air life. The old man took me on. He knew my governor, you see. It saved my life."

" You've liked being an agent ? "

" I have done, yes ; though, you may have heard, I shan't be here for long. Just as well, I dare say." Gregg smiled dourly at his leather-clad legs. " Big changes ahead," he explained. " I mightn't fit in."

The inspector suggested that no doubt a well-trained man would have no difficulty securing another good berth.

" Trained ! Call it that, I suppose, if practical experience from the age of sixteen counts for anything. It still does for some landowners, in spite of the young know-it-alls the estate colleges are turning loose on us. Lads that don't know even the smell of a stable. Oh, I shall keep afloat ! "

After half an hour's desultory conversation Headcorn had formed at least a superficial estimate of the man's personality. Edward Gregg seemed to him slow-blooded, signally lacking in both enthusiasm and initiative ; deeply ignorant of scientific farming, but sound, no doubt, on horses. He evidently had entertained a warm devotion to his former employers. His feeling for the present landlord was less easy to discover.

" Derek Boldre ? Decent fellow. Different, of course, from his father and his brother." The bleak smile had a destructive quality.

" Different ! In what way ? "

" Difficult to explain. Ungetatable. The same

stubborn streak as Tom, of course. Won't sell, when it's clearly to his advantage. Won't even listen to advice. I've shut up."

A grievance, then . . .

" Has there been talk of selling this estate ? "

For a second the muddy eyes met the inspector's. " Only solution." Gregg sucked at his briar. " Place of this size wants capital. Chenerys is eating its damned head off. Merely a matter of time and it'll be knocked down for taxes."

" I shouldn't think there'd be many offers."

" We had one just recently. Both brothers turned it down cold."

" Worth accepting, in your opinion ? "

" Oh, quite. Heaven's answer to prayer—considering the mortgages."

" You surprise me. Was it a friend ? "

" No. Some chap who'd once lunched here and been taken over the grounds. Took a fancy to it. Got an agent to write."

" Didn't he come again to make a closer inspection ? "

" He didn't. Odd, wasn't it ? There were rather especial circumstances. Wait, I'll show you the letter." Gregg tossed Headcorn a sheet with a heavy engraved heading. " That's not the one," he said. " This came later in answer to my reply. Oh, well ! I suppose Mr. Boldre hasn't handed me the first letter back. No matter, the offer's gone up the spout now. Chap's name was Elderson-Brown, James. He seemed to have money. Wanted, I think, to breed horses."

With a polite show of interest Headcorn glanced at the communication given him. It bore a date in March and was a mere formal acknowledgment pending further deliberation.

"I'm afraid I must ask you this," he said quietly. "Was Derek Boldre in debt to his brother?"

Gregg sat silent, nursing his pipe-bowl. At last he answered grudgingly, "Well, it'll be easy to find that out. He was."

"To what extent, or don't you know?"

"Couple of hundred. To finance the vet training. No interest. Tom wouldn't hear of that." Gregg's tone implied that the debt in any case would hardly have been repaid.

"Mightn't an up-to-date vet do rather well? One hears there's a shortage."

"Old Bannerman seems to satisfy people about here," said the agent disparagingly. "We don't change our vets overnight."

"Or your doctors, eh?"

Gregg looked at him. "I get you. Ugly mess for Blount, isn't it? Just about smash him, I should say. Decent old chap, too. The one time he forgot. That the size of it?"

It was a challenge the inspector forbore to meet.

"Just one thing more, Mr. Gregg, before I jog off. This trouble at Boxtree Farm." He paused attentively.

"Bad show. What about it?"

"To put it bluntly, I want witnesses. Any one who happened to be abroad last night between midnight and three o'clock. Long interval, you see. Does it by any chance apply to you?"

Gregg continued to look at his visitor. There came a shake of the head, the same lugubrious smile.

"Not me, Inspector. I had Major Fitts here, in this room till about twelve. He left. I turned in."

Within five minutes the two Yard men were whizzing along to Sompton Hall.

"Oh, I believe Gregg was out last night," grumbled the inspector. "He decided it was safe to lie about it—which means no one saw him."

"According to him, Fitts was out too during the crucial period, wasn't he? And you heard what the super said about his housekeeper spending these nights with her sister. That gives us another one with entirely free movements."

Absently the inspector answered that he intended to pay the major a call later on in the evening.

"He's dining out, so I've learned. I'd like to catch him before he discovers I've been having a go at his carpet-sweepings. Here we are. Staff entrance, mind."

The Kingscleres' housekeeper was an almost-lady. Her flat black silk chest was draped with a heavy gold chain, her dyed black hair worn in an Alexandra fringe. She spoke from rigid lips, but what she said was uncompromising. The butler, who closely resembled Dean Inge, repeated her categorical denials with crushing dignity, produced the latest in vacuum machines and stood by with a curling nostril while its meagre contents were examined.

"No good!" Headcorn sighed as they drove away. "Another blank; and if anything like a hypodermic syringe has ever entered those premises wild horses won't drag the truth out. Stop now at the Bull and Crown. We'll see if there's a message from the Yard."

There was. Headcorn read the telegram and instantly rang up the Whitehall number. Budworth stood in the booth, listening, and gave a stunned whistle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WYNN'S eyes met Derek's. "Not this evening," ran her glance. It returned to her knitting. Alison, looking up from the game of double Canfield she was playing with Pat, took keen note of her friend's relief.

Was Pat extraordinarily thick-skinned not to be aware of the unbearable tension? Either that or utterly lacking in imagination. When the first news of the inquest had penetrated her brain she had raged with resentment. Since then she had been almost unmoved.

It was after ten o'clock when the doorbell pealed. Pat turned her head expectantly; but it would not be Arthur, Alison felt sure. He was keeping carefully at a distance. Her heart stood still. Padgett returned from answering the bell.

"Oh, that creature!" Pat swept her cards together annoyedly. "I won't see him."

"He's asking for the master, Madam."

"Oh? Well, anyhow I'm for bed."

Cold with misery Alison said good-night and followed Pat upstairs. At the turn of the steps she saw that Wynn and Derek were on their feet, greeting the inspector. Their composure staggered her. She shut her door and prayed.

"You want to speak to me, Inspector? Then suppose we go along into the office." Derek led the way.

Wynn clenched her hands. It had come—and she had hastened it. Oh, for Derek's sake let her manage somehow to hold herself together! If she let go for

one instant she would fly into a thousand gibbering bits.

The office, so called, was small and furnished sparsely with a table, a mahogany filing-cabinet, two chairs and a barometer. Headcorn sat down. Beside him was a mounted horse's hoof, made into an inkwell. As he eyed it Derek took the opposite seat.

"Yes, what is it?"

Headcorn recognised the type before him and, quite impersonally, approved it. He asked a simple question and saw the young man's brow gather into a frown both puzzled and relieved.

"Letter? I don't understand."

"Handed you, I think, by your agent, Mr. Gregg. The first of a series from Reginald Hardmore, of Shrewsbury, dealing with an offer of purchase your brother received for this estate. Might I see it?"

"If I have it, certainly." Derek turned to the cabinet and ran through its various drawers. "No, it's not here. I must have handed it back with the other letters. Is it of any consequence?"

"Probably not. It's only that I was slightly curious after my talk with Mr. Gregg. Do you recall the precise details? How, for instance, this Mr. Elderson-Brown made his offer without putting in a personal appearance?"

"Is that how it happened? I didn't take it in; but then I paid very little attention to the matter, as I didn't mean to sell."

The inspector paused. "Mr. Boldre, what took you early this morning to the neighbourhood of the Glover farm?"

"Jarvis mentioned he saw me?" No surprise, only a sharpened line of the jaw. "I was out for a tramp."

"For any particular object?"

"I couldn't sleep. It was the thunderbolt of that post-mortem."

"Where did you go?"

"Nearly to Bewkesbury, cutting through my own grounds. Back through the village, left past the Glovers', making a wide circuit."

"See any one but this gamekeeper?"

"Not a soul. Yes, I did pass a car on the Bewkesbury road."

"What sort of car?"

"I fancy it was a Buick six-seater. It was too dark to make out who was driving it. It tore by very fast, going west."

"And the time?"

"I've little idea. I set out about two, and I'd got as far as the Ripley's thatched barn."

The inspector tapped his teeth with a pencil. "Another question, Mr. Boldre! On November fifteenth of last year did you purchase from Allan and Hanbury in London a single dose ampoule of anti-tetanus serum, portable size?"

"I couldn't have told you the date," said Derek dryly. "The facts otherwise are correct."

Headcorn remained expressionless. "Then you admit buying the stuff. And your reason? It's employed as a rule only by the medical profession."

"The obvious reason. Damage can be done on the hunting-field long before an antidote can be given."

"So you carried this ampoule about with you when you hunted?"

"Once. After that I forgot it. I haven't hunted often, you see. And now——" Derek Boldre hesitated. "The thing's disappeared."

"Disappeared! Have you questioned the servants?"

"I didn't realise it was gone till yesterday. I decided you could do the questioning."

The inspector played with his pencil, then rose. "Show me just where the ampoule was kept."

They passed through the empty lounge filled with the scent of spring blossom and smouldering logs. The stairs, Headcorn noticed, were slippery as glass and dented here and there with the print of a horse-shoe. His guide threw open a door.

"This is the room I've always occupied. The stuff was in its own box, on the top shelf of that wall cupboard."

"Did you ever speak of the serum to any one?"

"Never. The people down here would have laughed their heads off."

"I should like to search this room alone, sir."

Derek went out.

The cupboard filled one of two niches by the fire-place, the other blocked in by books, evidently the occupant's own. Novels of which the detective sort prevailed—essays by Virginia Woolf—a few volumes of medical literature, not text-books. These the inspector examined and put back.

Spotless white paper covered the cupboard shelves. Underneath the boards were stainlessly clean. He searched every inch of the red Wilton carpet. All he found besides a little fluff was a minute trace of tooth powder near the bathroom door.

He turned to the clumsy Victorian wardrobe. From the rod inside dangled a few suits, but their pockets disbursed only a normal residue of pipe-tobacco, a crumpled stamp and a few bits of scribbled memoranda wedged in the corners. The Burberry was not to be seen. It was probably in the coat-cupboard downstairs. He spent longest over an old,

re-dipped hunting coat. Tight! Not much leeway in this shrunken garment to tuck away even a portable syringe. The lining revealed nothing in the nature of a stain such as a bottle hurriedly thrust away after use might have left; but he remembered that these coats were usually washed after each wearing.

As he quitted the room someone at the end of the passage was creeping very cautiously down a back stair. Tiptoeing along he caught sight of a dark, sleekly-waved head and a white blanket coat vanishing through a door in the unlit lobby below. He followed as far as the door, saw that it led into the garden, and about to peer out stopped to listen to the servants' voices holding low argument in the staff sitting-room. When he was satisfied that nothing useful was likely to be forthcoming he tapped boldly at the door on his left, broke in on the conference and held the necessary interviews. They were singularly unproductive. Neither traps nor smooth speech gained him any fresh knowledge.

There was still the Burberry; and Boldre was not about. Crossing the still-deserted lounge he opened the coat-cupboard door, stepped back from its brightly-lighted confusion, and apologized.

"I didn't know I was intruding, Miss Marchmont."

There she was on the floor, surrounded by dogs. Tangled curls over hard, desperate eyes, much display of slim, shapely calf; on her lap a Bedlington, pinioned and being subjected to an arduous grooming.

The steel comb dropped. "Oh, don't mind me!"

Up she scrambled, chin high, leaving him the field. Five minutes later Headcorn grunted in disappointment and quitted the house.

Outside he cogitated. Someone had slipped forth into these grounds. Not Miss Marchmont; too dark and too tall to be Miss Young. He pried a little in the gloom, wherever possible keeping to the grass. The stable-yard was silent, moonbeams silvering the red roofs. Kitchen-garden and shrubberies alike empty. What about the other side of the house?

He found a walled rose-garden, its scrolled iron gates slightly ajar. Down at the far end, under what appeared to be a rustic arbour, a whitish blur moved. He skirted the old brick wall on its outer side. Nearing the corner he heard low-pitched voices. A man's and a woman's. He could identify both.

"Not now, Pat!" urged the younger Kingsclere irritably. "Can't you see it won't do?"

"Why ever not? I used my own extension."

"But my end, idiot! The Governor was listening to every word."

"Well"—sulkily—"and how was I to know you'd had this damned detective over there?"

"Use your brains, girl. My God! Surely you realise I've got to take the rap too. Didn't I have the same chance to pinch Fitts's revolver? Didn't I drive along that blasted lane?"

"Oh, it's all too utterly stupid! Why should you pinch anybody's old revolver? You hadn't any excuse to kill Glover."

"They don't know that. I might have had." The words were lower, spoken through set teeth.

"Why? He hadn't anything on us. No one has anything, so there!"

"Christ! Is it possible you still don't grasp it?"

A hand smote the arbour seat. All the small dry rose-leaves rustled violently. A pregnant hush; and then:

"You don't have to explain why you're treating me like a leper," said Mrs. Boldre icily. "Go home—and stop there. See if I mind."

A flounce of skirts on the bricked path.

"Hold on, Pat! You've got to listen to me." A second step strode angrily in pursuit. "No, you blasted fool, come here!"

The sound of a struggle. A sob of fury merging into a sigh, then soft, yielding murmurs, not yet wholly placated. The bench creaked and for long moments nothing but the vaguest of whispers reached over the wall. The listener waited. At last, after some quarter of an hour, a lithe, dinner-jacketed figure alighted in the lush grass only ten paces from where he stood. It moved away into the shadows towards a path leading to a stile. Presently, up at the other end of the walled enclosure, a white wraith appeared for an instant to melt unobtrusively into the back entrance of the house.

Budworth dozed over the wheel outside the lodge-gates. Roused, he lent a greedy ear to his chief's disclosures.

"Nice work, if you can get it. It's true, then, about those two. Here!" He had switched on the light. "And whose hair have you got on *your* shoulder?"

Headcorn craned to see. He brushed crossly at his homespuns.

"Fifty-seven dogs. The Marchmont girl was combing them in that damned cupboard."

The sergeant's eye glinted. "Yes. And which breed of dog grows hair like this?"

He held up a snowy cotton wisp. It curled between finger and thumb. The inspector goggled. made a grab, and for several seconds swore hard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

By the lamp on the table Wynn and Derek came together.

"Not yet," muttered Derek wryly.

"Not ever!" flashed the girl. "Why, what evidence can there be against you? You fell heir to this place. You were one of several people who could have taken that revolver. You took a walk at night as anybody might do. Oh, yes"—less confidently. "And you once had some anti-tetanus which someone stole."

He did not answer. She eyed him covertly.

"I wonder," she whispered, "if he's heard about Arthur—and Pat?"

"I doubt it." His glance strayed.

Voice hard she said, "If by any chance they do arrest you, he'll have to be told."

"Told what? A thing that can quite safely be denied? It won't clear me to bring accusations against your sister and a friend. Even if I felt inclined. Funny, I've always rather liked Arthur, you know."

"What's that got to do with it? If a man's done two murders is it likely he'll speak up to save another man from—from——" Horror swamped her. She was trembling from head to foot.

He laid brusque hold of her. "Don't, Wynn. Do you hear?" Suddenly he let go. "Don't," he repeated under his breath. "Keep all this for—a better object." He turned away.

Her heart stopped beating. Then it went on again. Of course, this was only his old self-deprecia-

tion cropping up as it used to do. She fondled his arm.

"Darling! If there could be a better object, I'd—I'd loathe it! You do know that?" He had withdrawn from her touch. She swallowed her despair and forced herself to be practical. "So he searched your room?"

"Oh, yes! It's a thin story about that stuff being stolen. Why should he believe it?"

"Arthur could have taken the syringe. Easily."

"And Gregg. And Padgett, and Fitts—to name a few. What's the use? We'll never find out."

"Wait! How could Glover have got on to the real reason Tom died? I mean——" She stopped, perceiving her error.

"Quite," said Derek, observant. "I thought sooner or later you'd strike that snag. Now you see, don't you, just how the whole thing dovetails together?"

She did see, cruelly. It all hinged on Glover. What he and only he had witnessed that day Tom came down . . .

"It didn't have to happen then. It was some other time—of course."

"What other time?"

"Oh, fool, how should I know? Tom had heaps of accidents."

"None when he was unconscious. Make sure every hunt-member and servant has been fully canvassed on that subject."

She shrivelled. "Oh, Derek, the beastliness of it! And nothing, no, nothing, we can do!"

"Nothing I can do. You can go back to town."

"What, now? As though I would!"

"It was your idea," he reminded. "Isn't it still a good notion?"

She picked a broken hyacinth from the bowl on the table and carefully fitted it back into the water.

"That just depends," she said slowly. "I'll tell you to-morrow."

Under his bedroom light the inspector glared at the new shred of white cotton.

"Now, where——?"

"Chenerys, Sompton Hall, Yew Lodge, Gregg's house." The sergeant listed the names with malice. "Must have been one of them. Only four establishments. You choose."

It had been stuck on his sleeve. For how long? That was the question, and how was it to be answered? The most reasonable guess was that the ravelling had been acquired in the Chenerys' coat-cupboard; but it was only a guess.

Budworth was saying, "See here, sir, suppose your hypo incident doesn't join up with the Glover shooting at all? Glover may have got on to some compromising passage between Kingsclere and Mrs. Boldre. Maybe it was that he was using to extort——"

Headcorn shook his head. "I don't believe it. Not after what I overheard to-night. I'm positive Kingsclere has wanted all along to marry this woman. He wouldn't have shrunk from a divorce."

"Maybe," the sergeant allowed. "And I must say about all we've collected points rather conclusively to Derek Boldre. Of course," he reasoned, "no matter what Glover may have seen that day he had to wait for his landlord to peg out—yes, and in a very definite way—before he could act. Which, apparently, is exactly what he did do. What bothers me is, how did Glover know the truth about that heart collapse?"

"How? First, he'd heard Dr. Ladbroke say that Boldre had a sound, vigorous heart. Next, the butler actually saw Blount giving an injection of some sort immediately prior to the collapse and reported it to Gregg who in turn passed the information on to Glover that same evening. Mrs. Glover told me how her husband walked across after supper to ask Gregg what had happened. If Glover already had suggestive knowledge he would form his own conclusions."

"Even though neither Gregg nor the butler knew what stuff Blount had injected? Pretty clever surmise for an ordinary farming bloke to make."

"I don't say it was merely surmise. Now which of those four houses——?" Irritably the inspector twirled his bit of white cotton.

"Chuck it, chief. Why don't you nab your man and trust to luck?"

"You would, I dare say. I'd rather make sure. I want one more try for that paper or other object inferred to be in Mrs. Glover's possession. Damn it, it *is* in her possession! And whatever it is, it's proof."

The May sun slanted hot on the Glover farmyard, though dew still beaded the hedges. The morning was young.

Wynn dismounted from her horse. Trim and resolute-backed in her hacking attire she crossed to the kitchen door, raised the knocker and hammered hard.

The door jerked open. Its aperture framed six feet of forbidding womanhood, topped by what might have been a ship's figurehead grotesquely carved into a human face.

"Well?" boomed an unfriendly bass, and eyes

small and suspicious ran her over from bowler hat to neat jodhpurs.

Of course. The aunt, of whom Bessie had told her. A ghastly female who had arrived in a black, bugled bonnet . . .

"I'm Miss Marchmont, from Chenerys. How is your niece? Might I see her, if she's awake?"

"Not 'ere." The door was pushed to.

"Not here?" Wynn gasped it, but managed to wedge her foot in the opening. "You can't mean she's gone away?"

"Wot'd you want of her?"

"Never mind that. I'm glad she's well enough to be out. I think I'll wait for her to come in."

"Please yourself." The Gorgon strode to a pan heaped high with frizzling onions.

Wynn turned back into the yard. The horrible old creature was probably lying. Meg Glover couldn't be up to making excursions. The entire thing had depended on catching her unawares; but now . . .

Here was Len Williams sidling from the cowshed, grinning. She knew Len. He used to grub up dandelions from the Chenerys' lawns. He beckoned.

"Well, Len, what is it?"

"She's down in them trees, Miss." He muttered it hoarsely and pointed. "I'll mind your horse."

The wood! Where George Glover had hidden. His widow, barely able to crawl, had sneaked there. For what purpose?

She set off down the slope, her brain in a turmoil. Hints of the woman's odd behaviour had come to her through the major. It was those queer rumours which had brought her here.

The copse lay before her, dank and bosky. Primroses like clotted cream studded the ground under

the trees. Round them was a faint feathering of bluebells. Each spring she and Derek had come to gather them. She mustn't think of that now.

What was that alien green, low down among the bushes ?

Her heart pounded. It was Meg Glover's soiled green jumper. But what was the woman doing, plumped on her knees ? She held her breath and stole closer. Now she could see. An arm plunged deep into the earth. Rummaging in a rabbit-hole—tossing back dead, sodden leaves. Something was being drawn forth. A man's filthy old handkerchief, long-crumpled, damp with mould. Out of it flew small, crawling life—and a solid object which fell with a tinkle.

Wynn swooped.

" Give that to me ! "

Meg Glover gasped, sat back on her heels. Ill unto death she looked, her face like the underside of a sole, one eye a slit in a great purple tumulus. Her bandage was awry, but she clutched to her breast the thing Wynn had tried to snatch. It winked in the sun—a contrivance of glass and steel.

" Oh ! So you'd like this, would you ? " The Welsh drawl was cool. The one normal eye held a bargaining gleam.

" Now, then," Wynn gritted, " hand it over ! "

" Oh ! "—insultingly. " So you do know whose it is ! "

" No," lied Wynn. " But the inspector wants it. Will you give it me, or must I take it by force ? "

The Glover girl cackled in derision. " Oh, the inspector wants it ! I see. Well "—she was edging away—" just you tell him to come and fetch it. How about that ? "

The spring wood reeled. The bitch *knew*. That

was why she had kept this damning evidence. She meant to let Derek think himself safe, and then slip along to collect her foul payments.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Wynn made a lunge. The pair of them fought like tiger-cats, crushing the bluebells beneath their tussling bodies. A wrench. Up rose the victor, a seam of red down her cheek.

"Got it," she panted, and felt an iron hand clamp down on her shoulder.

"I'll take care of that," said a voice with an odd vibration altering its level tones. "Many thanks."

The inspector glanced briefly at what he had taken, breathed hard, and stowed it in his pocket.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In the middle of an oat-field Wynn sank down, resting her head on her tight, drab knees.

This, then, was what her cursed meddling had brought her. That vile Glover woman had made Derek's guilt overwhelmingly plain. In a single hideous instant all the glass in the universe had splintered. All, that is, except one small wicked cylinder which the inspector now had safe in his pocket ; which he would never have got but for her.

The sun beat on her head. The empty landscape swam in a haze. She was going to be sick . . .

Up at the farmhouse Meg Glover had been restored to her four-post bed where she lay shaken and faint, rubbing a new bruise on her arm. Words came from her, injured, disarmingly simple.

" It looked such a lovely day, Inspector. I was feeling ever so much better, really I was. Auntie tried to stop me. I just had to slip out in the nice sunshine. I got as far as the woods, thinking I'd gather a few bluebells. George was so fond of them. I saw his handkerchief sticking out of a hole—like as if some dog had worried it up. How was I to know what was inside ? "

" You realise what it was ? " demanded the inspector grimly.

" Well, now I do, of course. And whose. Oh, George never said anything about it ! He never set eyes on it, that I'm certain. And he was forever losing his handkerchiefs. I expect he dropped this one when he was down there getting wood for the

stove. Someone found it and used it to wrap round this thing before hiding it away. Till he could come and get it again—or send, if he didn't like coming himself," added the whisper with meaning.

Tears ran down the white face. Was it because a secret game had been spoiled ? Blandly Mrs. Glover continued to justify herself.

" You saw how hard I was fighting to save your evidence for you, Inspector. Once she'd got hold of it you could have kissed it good-bye."

He could not shake her story ; but he no longer cared. His case was complete.

Through the window he saw Wynn Marchmont dragging herself up the hill. He went out and met her as she was about to mount her horse. Well aware of the irony he said :

" That was neat work. I'm vastly obliged."

Not looking at him she mumbled, " The syringe was stolen."

He knew how the futility of her assertion was stabbing her with sharp knives. Knew, took that his silence was brutal ; but what could he say ?

It was she who spoke, still turned from him, her face drawn and old. " Must he know I'm to blame ? "

" Let's trust there'll be no necessity."

She bowed her head, spurned assistance, and hoisted herself into the saddle. He watched her ride off. When the flowering pear-trees had hidden her he faced the fact that a disagreeable alloy was mingled with his triumph.

He shook himself. Here, this was no good ! There was nearly always some innocent victim to suffer. If he started sentimentalising over the fine women who got infatuated with scoundrels he might as well resign his badge and take to . . .

"I say, steady on!" In the kitchen doorway he beheld the ferocious aunt in the very act of shovelling an armload of dusty magazines into the blazing stove. "I'm taking those, you know."

"Wot, this muck?" A sniff and a glare. "Well, take 'em!" She dropped the copies of *The Reader's Digest* on the floor and turned her back on him.

There was one well-thumbed number which fell open at an accustomed place.

"I spotted this early on," he explained to Budworth at the hotel. "Only I wanted to see if the widow was interested in it. You might just test those pages for fingerprints. Oh, yes, it's all there," he continued as the sergeant stared and whistled. "Reduced treatise on anaphylaxis, giving mention of anti-tetanus serum. Glover had read it, and after the first Boldre accident he went through it again to check up on his knowledge. Now you see why he, if no one else, twigged the real cause of Boldre's death."

"Smart guy! Well, I've taken the prints on the syringe. It's been pawed over, I'd say, by our two girl scufflers; and I've found a nice set of Glover's prints, but that's the lot. Does it mean that Boldre, with every reason to clear off in double-quick time, stopped to wipe the thing clean? It goes deeper than that. Did he let Glover walk up to him and grab the syringe before your two friends rode on the scene?"

"Counsel's work, that," said Headcorn testily. "Let them thrash it out in court."

The inspector had promised himself one blunt talk with Arthur Kingsclere. It was an annoying interview, probably because the young man was prepared. Cold and slightly brusque he made his denial. Headcorn listened, then shot his bolt.

"You say that your relations with Mrs. Boldre have been merely friendly? I had better tell you at once of the conversation I myself had the luck to overhear in the Chenerys' grounds last night." In a wooden voice the inspector read what he had written down in his note-book. "That, I think, is a substantially correct report?"

The only expression on Kingsclere's features was scorn. "Agreed. And what of it? On the whole I'm rather glad you decided to eavesdrop. Now I'll speak plainly." A pause. The speaker walked to the window, faced round. "Certainly it's my intention to marry Mrs. Boldre. If her husband hadn't died I'd have done my utmost to persuade her to be divorced. I did object to her ringing me up. You know perfectly well why. From what you heard last night you must realise, though, that Mrs. Boldre hadn't grasped I was under suspicion."

He had definitely scored. Following up his advantage Kingsclere said, "It's been proved to you, hasn't it, that when Boldre was knocked out and taken to Glover's I hadn't been within shooting range of him after the hunt began to string out? So I must have had, you believe, some other action I wanted to keep sealed up. Can you produce one living witness to confirm that?"

"Living," repeated Headcorn softly. He saw the man opposite him flush an ugly scarlet.

"I get you. Well, take it I did shoot Glover. Say I wanted to stop dirty lies being told about Mrs. Boldre and myself. Was there much object in that after her husband was dead?"

When the inspector had left he fought a little with the idea just received of having had an encounter with a smooth, armoured car.

"And yet, Budworth, can we pin anything on

him? Not from the evidence we've collected, and I fancy we've got all there is to be got. Stafford suspected him, I know; but that may have been because the old chap had got wind of certain rumours about this love intrigue which appears to have gone on right under the husband's eyes—and because he knew about the gun and the journey at the right time into Bewkesbury."

"There's something more, sir. Kingsclere picked Tom Boldre up after the fatal accident."

"True; and this much is fairly certain: Stafford was all in a fog over the things that counted. What did he or any other upper-class inhabitant know about anaphylaxis? This lot doesn't mug up potted science from popular periodicals. Most of them don't read at all."

Some of them talked, though. He was remembering the superintendent's remark about Major Fitts knowing a good deal more than one might suppose. It might be worth while to pay him a surprise visit, see what he could be tricked into giving away.

Fitts was out. Headcorn declared a willingness to wait for him, and obtained Mrs. Hargrave's permission—grudgingly given—to wash his hands. Left alone he made routine use of his solitude.

Quickly but thoroughly he inspected the major's rather extensive wardrobe. Every garment was well-brushed, the shoes polished to mirror perfection and carefully treed. He examined the clean ebony toilet articles ranged with military niceness on the starched linen cover, scanned the insides of drawers and glanced towards the bed-table. He picked up the volume on which folded spectacles reposed. Not, oddly enough, about any form of sport. He shrugged and stole downstairs.

In the prim, stuffy drawing-room he did not linger long, nor yet in the cubby-hole of a dining-room. Sitting down in the study he pulled open the one table-drawer and surveyed its tidy contents. A shabby note-book attracted him. In it were annotations of the major's various investments—solid-paying concerns. It would seem that the old gentleman whose portrait glared from the drawing-room wall had left his son quite decently off.

Far back in the drawer was a dingy book. Headcorn drew it out and was just removing from its pages a blank sheet of paper when the telephone rang. In haste he put everything back in its proper place—and barely in time, for here was the housekeeper looking in on him.

"No good you stopping, sir. The major's lunching with Colonel Stafford."

Firmly she ushered him out.

In the drive he met Gregg. The agent stopped with his slow, mournful smile and balanced awkwardly back and forth without speaking. In the dazzling sunshine he made an oddly-depressing figure—dun-coloured from tie to tight gaiters, skin dried, eyes muddy in the depths of their bony sockets. Even the retreating hair looked ill-nourished, faded out.

"Major at home?" asked Gregg after a lengthy delay.

"No, at the Chief Constable's. He's this moment rung up."

"Oh!"

At the back of Gregg's eyes had been another question, an uneasy one. The gleam of it still lurked as Headcorn nodded and passed on.

Budworth had finished his job with the finger-prints. The copy of *The Reader's Digest* revealed a

multitude of Glover's finger-marks, and in just one portion—it covered three pages—a few belonging to Mrs. Glover.

"That settles it," said Headcorn and closed the magazine with a snap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WYNN was ill. She had dug herself in. Since breakfast of the previous day she had lain in her own room with curtains drawn, refusing food. Only Bessie had seen her.

Alison, next door, listened but heard nothing. She went on with her wild scribble to Colin :

"I saw her when she came in from her ride. She was looking like death. I can't help thinking it's some worse thing she's found out. If the inspector knows about it, why does he keep us dangling in this horrible way ?

You say I must come home. Colin, I can't—not now. Too many rats have been leaving the ship. I've simply got to stand by Wynn, anyhow for the present. I told you about Arthur and the major. Well, since then it's just every one else who is keeping carefully away. When I think what it was like those first few days ! Friends dropping in just any old time, frank and easy ; and now—— ! "

She did not write the tenth part of it. How Gregg and the servants were slinking about with strained expressions. How the three visible members of the household, when they had to meet, forced flat conversation, avoiding one another's eyes. How Derek went on doggedly with his tasks though the whole place waited—waited for the bomb to explode.

And in that darkened room next door Wynn lay with sealed lips . . .

The landing was empty. Alison cracked open the other door and gripped her courage in both hands.

"Wynn—are you awake?"

No movement from the bed. A cool, purplish dusk; the silver sheen of a mirror. A voice muttering, "Come in."

"Head better?" Alison moved forward.

"Head? Oh, that!" The rough curls stirred impatiently.

Outside a bell tinkled. The girl in the bed raised herself. "What was that?"

"Only a bicycle in the road. Look, Wynn, couldn't you just give me some idea——?"

"Of what?" Wynn sank back, staring up at the ceiling.

"There's something, I know it. Would it hurt to let me hear?"

There was another dreadful silence. Slowly Wynn dragged herself upright. Her eyes looked sunken as from a long illness. Round them were bruised patches; along her cheek a red scratch.

"No." The voice came from far away. "You'll have to know soon. You see, I rode over to Boxtree Farm."

"*You* did, Wynn? But why?"

"I hoped I could make that woman tell me the truth. It seemed to me the one way to keep Derek from being arrested—to find out who really gave Tom that first injection. It mightn't have happened during the hunt. I kept saying, suppose it was done some other time, by—well, a person who had a good reason?"

Arthur Kingsclere . . . "Yes. Go on."

"Well, I was wrong," said Wynn hardily. "It was Derek after all."

"Oh, my dear——!"

It was all Alison could say. Any sympathy in words would be an outrage. Besides Wynn was whispering again in the same dry voice—telling how it had happened. Now she had finished. Alison wet her lips, drew a dazed hand over her forehead.

"But . . . I don't quite get it. At least, not the whole. *When* did Glover hide the syringe? Before Colin and I saw him? It doesn't just make sense."

A barren shrug. "Maybe she hid it. What does it matter? You see, it was Derek's."

Cold fingers clutched Alison's heart. "Derek's! He actually had one? With anti-tetanus in it? Oh, Wynn, are you sure?"

"He told me. He says it disappeared from his room here, some time ago. So now you know."

And Glover had seen him use it on Tom. There seemed no way out . . .

Desperately Alison ransacked her store of impressions. She recalled something now which she did not believe she had mentioned in her talk with the inspector. When Glover had strolled off to get the gate he had bent over near the two horses as though to pick something up from the ground. If it was the syringe, then his interest in Tom's wrist became only too understandable. Though how had the syringe got where he found it?

"Glover can't have just grabbed the thing out of Derek's hand," she argued, half to herself. "It's too utterly silly to imagine it. And if not, then he didn't come into the open till the time we all saw him. How on earth——"

With sudden horror she knew. From the distant hilltop, up behind the wood, *she had seen Derek go across to his horse and start to get on. . . .*

"It must have dropped on the ground." Wynn said it grimly. "Isn't it the only answer? It's not

really important. What does matter is Derek's own admissions about buying the stuff and bringing it here. The inspector got all that the other night. Why he's fiddling about I can't imagine." Cool, logical; but as though a dead woman had spoken.

Alison saw it all with pitiless clarity. Wynn was hiding here not because she knew that at any moment the man she loved would be charged with two murders and placed under arrest. What had shattered her stiff morale was her own hideous knowledge of his guilt.

Little out-of-door sounds filtered into the dim bedroom. The clip-clop of a gardener's shears; the tremulous whinny of a horse. Wynn's head had turned towards the wall. Alison closed the door on the agony she had helped bring about and now could not alleviate.

In the lounge Alison found Pat waiting for tea. Pat wandered about, smoking. She hurled out disjointed remarks, like missiles intended to wound.

"Derek's not one of us, you know. Never was, for some reason. He's sharp, that's what it is. Uses his brain."

It should have been funny, only it wasn't. The tone grated. How like Pat Boldre to take other people's tragedy as a mere personal inconvenience!

The firm, unsubtle fingers lit another Balkan Sobranie. "And to think none of this mess need ever have happened! Chenerys would have been sold long ago if Tom had only listened to me."

"To you?" asked Alison, surprised. "Why, I always supposed——"

"That I wanted to go on living in this great barn? Never! Our tuppence halfpenny income wasn't up to it. We could have had Lime Acres. Decent

stabling, just enough bedrooms for three or four guests at a time. We could have managed that, yes, and run up to town in the off-seasons. Why, Fred would have taken this place off our hands and gladly, till Tom choked him off."

"Major Fitts! You don't mean he made an offer for Chenerys?"

"Well, he would have done. Tom took it as a joke. Fred's got money, you know. He's dying to breed horses and do things on a big scale. Owning Chenerys was his boyhood dream. He told me, when he first came home from India and started looking about."

Pat's attention was straying. Alison, too, found herself listening with bated breath to the steps on the gravel outside the open front door. They passed by. Her hostess said abruptly:

"I think I'll go to London. Yes, that will solve it."

Solve it! For herself. Bluntly Alison said, "But you couldn't leave Wynn! Not now, of all times."

"Without a chaperon? She'd have you. Of course, if you left as well, she'd have to clear out. As she'd have done days ago if she'd had an atom of sense."

"But surely——"

"Surely what?"

Oh, what was the use? The grey eyes with their raying of black stiff lashes outstared her blandly.

"Tea! Padgett, you're late. Good Lord, look who's here!"

It was Wynn, coming steadily downstairs. Wynn, in a garish lemon yellow jumper with a high collar that made her new thinness the more noticeable. She had done her curls in a crisp coxcomb and made a bold business of her mouth with vermilion lipstick.

Her sister levelled a long stare, lounged towards the silver-laden tray and began to pour out.

No Derek. That was a relief, while it lasted. Wynn drank her tea. No one spoke; no one ate. Hot scones, wafer bread and butter and a fresh orange cake, brave with green pistachio and cherries, all went untouched.

Their eyes turned on the door. It was only Gregg. In he roamed with his polite, wryly-apologetic air. He declined tea, swayed on his heels.

"Seen the major?" he asked. "I fancied I'd catch him here."

No one had seen the major, and all understood. It wasn't the major Gregg had expected to find. It was Derek. Gregg was wondering as they were where he was keeping himself—and all of a sudden Derek's failure to appear looked ominous. Gregg went. The dreadful silence extended its barren waste, and not one of them seemed able to shatter it.

"I think——" began Alison and dried up. She had no notion what she had intended to say.

An agitated step outside. As the three of them jumped the major burst in, glared confusedly round.

"Seen Derek?" he blurted.

"No," said Wynn woodenly. "Why?"

"Why? Oh—no particular reason. Been trying to locate him, that's all." The indistinct mumble made matters worse. "Sorry," Fitts excused himself, and rushed off.

Pat sprang up, setting the teacups atinkle. "I'm going! You two can do as you please——"

Her lips rounded in an O. The baize service-door had opened, and there stood Derek. They all gaped at his dishevelment. Dirty sweat ran down his forehead. His shirt-sleeves were rolled high, his brown, hairy forearms plastered with . . . was it blood?

Wynn was on her feet. "What is it?"

He looked at her only. "That mare's foaled. The fools had her off there in the south paddock. Just luck I happened along." He had been furious. The signs of it remained. Now he spoke evenly, and as if no other matter concerned him.

A pause. "Well," said Wynn, "is it all okay?"

"Quite. No thanks to this crew. I'll have to wash and get back."

Life seemed an hysterical farce. On the verge of arrest for murder—and bothered only by a mare's accouchement! Never, thought Alison, would she understand these English people; not in a thousand years.

The door-bell was ringing. Derek had stopped on the stair. All eyes could see the two men in the open doorway; yet no one stirred while the butler moved in, crossed the floor and came back.

"Inspector Headcorn, sir."

Derek had gone a little grey under his grime, but his nod was cool as he walked forward—and waited.

"Mr. Boldre," said the heavier man, "I must require you to come along with me. Now." He displayed a warrant.

"I see," said Derek. "Yes, of course. Might I be allowed to clean up?"

"If my sergeant goes with you, certainly."

"Oh? Yes, to be sure, I understand."

The tall young detective tramped by Derek's side up the stairs. Wynn came to life.

"Inspector, you're wrong! Listen, I want to tell you——"

"Please, Miss Marchmont!" Rather sternly Headcorn raised his hand. Her eyes held battle with him, then gave up.

She was by the window, back turned, when Derek

came down. She stood there in the same position with her chin up, never moving though grinding tyres outside warned her of the trio's departure. Not even when Pat had torn to the upper floor shouting in a choked voice for her trunks did she make any sign.

It was Alison's attempt to speak which ruptured the spell.

"Don't!" Wynn faced round, fending the words off. "Not till I've said my say. Derek can't be guilty. I've just seen why."

Her eyes blazed with confidence. In these brief moments it was as though a veil obscuring them had suddenly been swept away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It was fever, of course. Her own hands shaking, Alison tried to force Wynn down on to the Chesterfield. The taut muscles were unyielding.

"And it's been staring us all in the face." Wynn still wore that look of having arisen out of hell. "Listen! When Arthur was here last. Remember what happened?"

"Not quite. That is, he acted a little peculiarly, and Derek did too, but——"

"*Derek did too!* Surely you see? Oh, gosh, you must. Think, Alison, think! Arthur's kept away from us all this time. He came then only because he supposed Derek wasn't here. He believed Derek had taken the major's revolver that day they were at Yew Lodge together. So he didn't want to see Derek if he could help it. Didn't you notice how he behaved when Derek suddenly came in?"

"That's so. He seemed horribly embarrassed and left right away. But I still don't——"

"Wait! You've said it yourself. Didn't Derek act in the same way? Only he did it first. He came in. He saw Arthur. He stopped dead in his tracks, mumbled something silly about having to go on with work and backed out again. *Now* has it dawned on you?"

It had. "Of course! If each believed the other was guilty——"

"Then neither of them can be guilty. Not possibly. Which proves it was someone else. I don't expect you to share my certainty. How can you?

What you saw that Saturday is blocking your vision—and why shouldn't it? Only don't lose sight of this: You didn't see Derek giving that injection."

Perfectly true. Alison hadn't seen that.

"Oh, I'm not saying Derek's incapable of committing a murder," continued Wynn more calmly. "I can see him strangling a man, even shooting him, under the right circumstances. He'd do it in hot blood, though. What he couldn't do is to plan a deliberate, mean, sneaking murder. And if he didn't kill Tom, why should he shoot George Glover?"

Fatuous, fanatical faith! Alison could have wept. But Wynn raced on:

"What counts, of course, is that *I* know he didn't do either of these murders. I'd have died, I think, otherwise. That's all over, thank God! Now it's up to me to find the flaw in this evidence. When you saw Tom and Derek together in that field—when you first saw them, I mean—were they the only men in sight?"

"Absolutely. Only those two—Tom on the ground, Derek kneeling beside him." (Oh, if she could only have qualified this!) "And just the two horses, Tom's chestnut with the white star, Derek's brown."

Wynn nodded and swept it away. "Now listen: I've timed that bit. From the hill where you stopped right through the timber took me exactly five minutes. I didn't rush, because I remembered you were hung up. Five minutes is a good deal of time. The rest—over the wall and to the far side of that thick bank of hawthorn—I managed in fifty seconds. Perfectly possible, then, for someone who had stopped with Tom before Derek rode out of the copse

to get clean off the scene. I mean, unlikely as it looks, it could have been done."

Alison felt startled and wretched, more so when Wynn added, "Tom, you know, may have been down for several minutes. Derek didn't actually see him take the toss."

But there was only Derek's word for this! Alison was thinking of the ugly hint Glover had let fall. He had said that till he noticed Tom's bad wrist he had wondered if the accident had been caused by the huntsman behind riding up on Mr. Boldre.

Her distress must have shown in her face.

"Odd, you think," said Wynn shrewdly, "that if Tom was there long Glover waited all that while to investigate? It's not odd at all if Glover had seen another man there, doing what struck him as peculiar. Glover was a bad egg."

"Even so, why should he go on hiding?"

"To make sure whether or not Tom was dead. The injection might have killed him then and there. Or maybe Glover did venture out, heard another rider coming and dodged back. Somehow, Mrs. Glover must have got the wrong end of the stick. Point is, how can I prove it?"

Fiercely she drove back her curls. "Three weeks!" she groaned. "Every single recollection of that day will be wiped out by now. Supposing a thing like that did occur, who would remember it after all this long time?"

Alison suggested Major Fitts. "Nothing much gets by him, does it? And I'm sure he's dying to help."

"The major!" Wynn turned the suggestion over meditatively. "We'll go over to his place first thing to-morrow. Somehow, I'd rather wait till Pat has gone up to town, we shall feel freer then."

The day was fine but still fresh when they found the major by his study window, bent absorbedly over a book. He closed it with a snap. Whipping off a pair of owlish spectacles, he bustled to the door, and welcomed them in. His embarrassment was rather piteous. He raised the whisky decanter wistfully, but Wynn shook her head. She came bluntly to the point. He polished his eyeglass and reset it, trying with scant success to steady his attention.

Suddenly he stared. The idea was penetrating.

"Let's see: You'd like—oh, most understandably!—to establish the order we were in that—that particular day. Who rode in front of who—and so on. Am I getting it straight?"

"Just that," said Wynn. "I shall ask all the other hunt-members. I came to you first, because you seem more noticing than most people."

"Tut, tut!" He swelled a little over the compliment. "I'm fairly alive to what's going on about me, I don't deny it; but——! It's a tallish order, this, don't you realise that?" He beat a broken tattoo. "Impossible!" he exploded. "Why, that hunt's ancient history!"

"I don't expect much, Major. Only who rode immediately in front of you during a certain part of the run. And——" she moistened her lips—"whether you saw someone who had been behind suddenly dash by?"

Fitts eyed her closely and then glanced away. "Humph! Let me get back to it, if I can . . . Here! A bit or two is coming clear. Crossing that—that field you mention the chap in front of me was the vicar. Yes, I can see old Crump now, having the deuce of a time with his nag. Poor devil's mouth all soapsuds. Wrong bridle, as usual. Ted Horrocks

was close to him, and Blount. By Jove, yes! There's three I can recall, all bunched together. Not so bad, what?" His enthusiasm waned. "Not so good, either. There were far too many others behind, coming thick and fast. And I never noticed any of the crowd doing what you suggested."

"Was Arthur among those behind?"

"Arthur, my hat! Not he—nor your sister. . . . We hadn't so much as their dust from the first meadow to the kill."

"Didn't Tom say he had thought you were just in the rear of him when he took that toss?"

"Did he? Oh yes, I remember. Well, I was with him for quite a time, right up to that marsh by the watermill. That was when I left him—and Derek, too. He was so busy getting clear he didn't notice."

When Wynn had gone ahead out of the room Alison found a detaining hand on her sleeve. Worriedly the major whispered, "You're sticking here, I hope?"

She nodded. "I feel I mustn't leave her entirely alone."

"Good girl!" He said it with strong relief. More than ever, Alison felt the major knew something beyond the mere business of the revolver. Something he was hoping he need not be forced to divulge . . .

"So what?" Joining Wynn by the yew hedges she paused.

"Vicarage," snapped Wynn and set off along the lane.

Presently she remarked. "No one so far has said anything about seeing Tom down. I must make sure of that, of course."

"Who could have seen him but Derek and us?

Tom and Derek were the very last except for Colin and me. I could swear to that, because of the splendid view we had from that hill. I don't think we should have got so close if we hadn't unintentionally chopped off a bit. As it was there was a biggish gap between us and Tom. And another one, I suppose, between Tom and Derek."

Her last sentence sounded hesitant. Wynn answered calmly :

" Oh, there was ! Derek got mired when Tom did ; and he had trouble with his girths. He was an ass not to see to them himself instead of trusting to the grooms."

And Wynn was trusting Derek's statement about the girths. All along it had seemed queer for so outstanding a horseman to have fallen into the extreme rear. . . .

The vicar proved stiff and utterly non-committal. He could not, or would not, recall any single detail concerning the hunt in question.

Faces peered from bowed shop-windows as they made their way into the village. More than one pedestrian dodged too quickly to cover. Red spots burned in Wynn's cheeks, but on she stalked, level-eyed, to Dr. Blount's house.

The doctor rose clumsily to receive them and sank back at once in the saddle-bagged chair in which they had found him glooming over the morning paper. His loose jowls were unshaven, his eyes hag-ridden and ashamed. Wynn stated her question. He pondered dully and shook his head.

" It's all a jumble now. Think I haven't done my damnedest to recollect that day ? Not that it would get me anywhere if I could. Or you, either, for that matter."

A long, sunken silence. He rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"No, it's no use. There's just the one picture that comes before me: young Horrocks, taking a five-barred gate like a bird. I did that once." He said nothing of the vicar or Major Fitts.

"Though he did remember Ted," said Wynn as they quitted the High Street. "And Ted's not likely to have been one of the stragglers. Maybe if I go on digging——"

She broke off. Bearing down on them in stately progress was an aged woman, iron-backed on a magnificent bay mare. It was Lady Horrocks—Ted's grandmother. Wynn moved towards her—and drew back. The filmed old eyes were glaring through her as though she were part of the landscape.

"It's the cataracts," murmured Alison, and caught sight of her companion's flaming face. "Oh, my dear, you can't think she meant to cut you?"

"No?" Wynn quickened her step.

"Please, please don't start imagining things! Whatever Lady Horrocks thinks she can't hold you responsible."

"I expect quite a lot are doing that. It won't stop me, though. I'll have to drive to the other houses," Wynn threw over her shoulder, "but I shan't let you come along. Hadn't you better go back to London? If you do I'll quite understand."

"It's the last thing I'd do—and you know it. Unless you really want to get rid of me. I owe it to you, Wynn—and besides, I want to stay. After all, didn't I start this trouble?"

"You!" Wynn gave a jarring laugh. "Oh, no,

I'm the one who messed it all up. Think I don't know ? "

" Well, split even. Let me help. That's only fair."

" That's decent of you, Alison. All the more decent," Wynn added distinctly, " because you think Derek's guilty."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Oh, Wynn, you've no right to say——"

The lie stuck in her throat. Wynn shook her head with a muttered, "Don't think I blame you," walking so fast now that Alison had to run to keep pace. As they turned into the secluded lane both halted. There ahead of them was Arthur Kingsclere's Rolls-Bentley with Arthur at the wheel and Ted Horrocks on horseback beside him. The two were holding hushed conversation, but now both heads swerved round. The car moved on. Ted rode slowly up to the two hatless girls, dismounted, and wrung their hands hard.

Wynn said, "I wanted to speak to you, Ted."

He at least was friendly. He had turned a miserable red, though, and his limpid blue eyes were like a hurt infant's as he towered above them, a freckled, scrawny lad with a spiked Adam's apple jerking nervously. He listened. From the pained consideration he gave Wynn's remarks it was pretty evident he had gone over the matter often and unhappily.

"You remember Mr. Crump, on account of that bridle; and the doctor. You say they were both in company with you over this particular stretch?"

"Quite. I'd taken a bad header. It put me back with them for a bit."

"Think, Ted. Don't you remember any one else just there?"

Clearly he didn't; so that was that. They walked on in flat silence.

By the lodge-gates the Rolls-Bentley had drawn up. Arthur got out and spoke to Wynn diffidently. Not about Derek. Oh, no, only on the subject of Pat's wanting him to fetch her fur coat to London so she could have it stored. Standing aside, Alison reached a quick decision. She did not like Arthur Kingsclere. Why ? It was true from the first he had accorded her the precise degree of attention one gives a chair placed in the wrong room ; yet she hoped she was above personal bias. She did not for a moment believe him a murderer, nor did she strongly condemn him for having wanted another man's wife. And after a rather cold pattern his breeding was perfect. She gave it up.

" Bessie will give you the coat." Wynn's tone matched her companion's. " So you're driving to town, are you ? " She gazed in front at the budding chestnut trees.

" To-day. Any message to Pat ? "

" No, I think not."

Still Wynn did not look at him. Letting him drive past she went straight to the garage, got out the Austin, and set forth stoically on her house-to-house canvass.

The pity of it ! Alison would have given all she possessed except Colin to have been able to share so blind a faith.

Late afternoon, and Wynn had not come back. All day Alison had been grappling painfully with the problem, hoping against hope that somewhere her own belief might break down. Always the same unanswerable question confronted her : " If Headcorn's gone over the ground, and we can be sure he has done that thoroughly, what's left to be discovered ? " If she were to be of the smallest help she must thrust that aside. Tabulate things.

"Murder isn't done without reason. Now Arthur is out of it, who but Derek had even the dimmest excuse? It would have to be (1) Someone who in some way benefited by Tom Boldre's death. (2) Someone who could quite easily have stolen Derek's hypo outfit. (3) Someone well acquainted with anaphylactic reactions. (That's a tough one. Is there so much scientific knowledge spilling about this place?) (4) Someone on the spot—close at hand. Almost certainly present on that hunt."

It was the sum total of the requirements which only Derek seemed to fill . . .

Waiting for Wynn she was roaming restlessly through the maze of rhododendrons opposite the house. A step behind her made her look round. Gregg approached, with his well-bred manner and doleful smile, halted two feet away and having knocked out his pipe stowed it negligently in a side pocket. He did not speak at once, yet she knew he had something definite to say. His delay made her slightly nervous.

"Wynn's deserted you." He swayed on his heels. "Any notion what it's all about?"

Like Arthur he made no direct reference to the arrest.

"No," she answered, and tried to make it carry conviction.

Gregg looked at his wrist watch. "Nearly eight o'clock." He turned a listening head.

"Well?" she said sharply. "You can't surely be worrying that she's not home?"

"Oh, Lord, no!" Still he gazed towards the hidden drive. His smile had gone, but the creases of it remained deep-graven in his gaunt ill-nourished jaws.

"You are worried. Why?"

His eyes returned unwillingly. " Well—I wouldn't say worried. Wynn, though . . . I understand she did rather muck things up. With the best intentions, of course. I rather wanted to know how she struck you. Disappearing like this——"

" There she is now ! " cried Alison, and fled.

For a panicked moment she wondered if the car she had heard was really the Austin. Those soured eyes which in an unguarded instant had seemed to exult had conveyed so sickening an idea . . .

Relief swept over her. She met Wynn at the garage door. Quickly she telegraphed her question.

" Blanks." Wynn was haggard, hard-faced. " Not a soul saw Tom or Derek after the first two miles. I might have known it was hopeless. I'm being advised to keep out of it altogether. Not draw notice to myself." Her lip curled bitterly.

She banged the stable-yard gates and stared at the dirty two-seater which had just driven into the drive. Dr. Blount lumbered out, came towards them with a hang-dog air.

" No," he said, " I won't come in. I just thought of something, that's all."

Wynn's eyes pinned him. " Remembered something you mean ? "

" Well, yes. Came to me when I was turning over that matter you brought up. There was another fellow riding alongside of Crump and me, from the Glover field right to Hogarth's Dip. And before, I dare say. The second Fitts mentioned it——"

" When ? " It was the crack of a whip.

The doctor said, " Oh, this morning, soon after you'd gone. He dropped in, we got gassing, and . . . odd how memory works. Just a chance word, and something sticks up out of the fog. Oh, it's nothing to make a song about, is it ? I just like correcting

misstatements, on principle." This last with pathetic defiance, as he jerked a nod and clambered back into his seat.

Wynn gazed after the dirty car till it had vanished. She bent and carefully picked a nettle from her skirt.

"Queer," she said. "Or is it? You see, Ted's another one who's had a sudden revival of memory. I've just seen him. He told me the same thing."

"About the major? Has he really remembered, or——"

"Says so. You know, Ted's terribly obliging. Anyhow, Fred called in at the Horrockses before lunch; and before that, if it's of any interest, he had a chat with the vicar."

Their eyes held consultation. Wynn beat back her limp curls.

"Nothing in it, of course," she snapped. "Can't be—naturally. Unless . . . could I have put the wind up Fred this morning, do you think? Reminding him that Tom believed he was behind."

Alison said nothing. Wynn mused dispassionately, "All this bustling about and jogging people's memories! It's what Fred's been doing, that's certain. I always knew if you peeled off his bombast you'd find only a scared rabbit; but what's he frightened of? That's what I'd like to know. Ted didn't remember when we spoke to him in the lane. The doctor hadn't a glimmer of recollection; and neither had Mr. Crump. Yes, I'd better hand this on to the inspector. I'll telephone him now."

"Oh, Wynn, I—I wouldn't!"

"Why not?" Wynn lowered her tone. "Then listen: Have you ever considered that business about Fred's revolver? Suppose—I say just suppose

—you wanted to shoot a man and throw dust in every one's eyes as to who did it. Wouldn't it be rather neat to provide an opportunity for the weapon to be stolen and quickly broadcast the fact that it was gone ? "

Alison gasped a little. " But did the major——"

" Certainly he told. He mentioned it to Colonel Stafford that same evening before any one knew Glover was dead. And he let it out that two callers had been with him while he was cleaning the revolver he now couldn't find. Oh, I know it's just the sort of behaviour we'd expect from Major Fitts. I only say, supposing this one time it all had a purpose behind it ? " Another pause. " And for that matter who more easily than Fred could have helped himself to what was left in Derek's cupboard ? He's always running up to that room to wash and brush up."

Alison spread her hands. " But why ? " she asked helplessly. She added, " And if he saw anti-tetanus staring him in the face would he know what could be done with it ? "

" Hardly." The spell seemed broken. " Of course, the whole notion is asinine, isn't it ? Brains of a gnat, devoted to Tom—and not a thing to gain! Might as well say it was Padgett, or Gregg." She turned into the doorway too quickly to observe the minute alteration in Alison's face. " Anyhow," she muttered, " it may suggest to the inspector that this case isn't quite closed."

A thrush flew up from some spot deep among the high rhododendrons immediately opposite. Alison remembered how she had left Gregg standing there, hidden in the thick-walled tunnel. He'd be gone long before this . . .

Wynn came back, a strange stoniness in her eye.

The inspector had shaken the dust of Sompton from his feet.

"I got through to Scotland Yard and caught him. He says it will be sheer waste of time for him to look into this little matter."

The gong boomed softly from inside the house. Wynn did not move. Eyes on the high wall of green across the drive she said, "Quite certain you wouldn't be wiser to go home?"

"Entirely. I supposed that was settled."

"I see. Well"—slowly—"I've given you your chance."

Out of a horrid nightmare Alison fought back to consciousness. In her ears sounded the tag-end of a shriek. Part of her dream?

"*Alison!*"

It was Wynn calling her. In the same moment she smelled burning. Out of the covers she leapt and plunged dizzily on to the landing. She drew back, half smothered, took a determined breath and looked again.

Round Wynn's door and between pale smoke billowed in clouds. Thick, surging smoke, with a lurid tinge from its core. It swirled, sucked in on her as her open window created a draught, choked her lungs, blinded her eyes. She had heard, though, the sharp crackle of flames, got a pungent whiff of charred fabric.

"Wynn! Are you there?"

Her friend's cry ripped back to her. "Fire-extinguisher! On the wall!"

She saw it, the red metal winking at her from its corner niche, made a lunge, thinking that never in her life had she known how to handle one of these objects. A weird form in a raincoat slopped rapidly

along the passage. Padgett—and he had taken the extinguisher in capable hands.

"She's there, Padgett, in the fire!"

The smoke column had split, sending up angry sparks. In the opening was Wynn, beating and lashing furiously with a rug.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"But Derek, I did hear the front door! It was the thud of it woke me." A desperate urgency had come into Wynn's voice.

"You dreamt it." Derek looked at the warder stolidly planted at the end of the long table. "How could any one get inside?"

"Easy! That door stands open all day. Whoever it was hid in an empty room till he knew it was safe."

Sceptically he said, "And then started a blaze right by your room? Not likely, my dear. Those jobs have a way of being found out."

"Idiot! The house would have been burned to the ground. Alison and I would have been burned to cinders too but for my big luck in hearing that door close. What would have been left to prove how the fire got started? As Padgett says, just one more country place gone west because of bad electric wiring."

"Well, there's your answer—the wiring. My father saved money on it. Has any one looked to see?" he asked keenly.

"Not yet. The inspector's going to this evening. So that's something accomplished," she added with triumph.

Derek shot her a discerning glance, opened his lips and thought better of it. When he did speak it was again in the muted, expressionless mumble which so maddened her.

"Wynn, my dear: May I beg you once more to

keep totally out of this business? Not interfere in any way?"

She stared at him. He said, "For my sake, if not for your own."

"What on earth have I done?" she flamed. "I can't imagine what——"

"Just this," he whispered, leaning forward. "Any activity on your part—any unwise move, shall we call it?—can only lead to—to . . . Here!" His hands gripped the table. "You're not to be dragged into this mess at all. Do I have to diagram that?"

She twisted her gloves. First Alison's odd manner; and now, oh, incredibly, Derek himself . . . !

"Please, Derek! I know I've been a fool, but you've got to understand this is something quite apart from me. And it's put a new light on everything. *Everything*. Don't you grasp it? What happened last night was a deliberate attempt to wipe out both of us, my guest and myself, in such a way that no one could possibly have said it wasn't accidental. After all I've told you you must see the reason. I've been digging into the corners that haven't been examined before. If I went on I might strike something. Maybe already I've done that without realising it. Now are you getting it?"

"I'm certainly getting your idea. Darned clever, I must admit. But the basis is just a little too thin. What is there the least chance of your finding out?"

He didn't believe her. She had come here so ablaze with certainty, of hope, and all she met was dead opposition. She sucked the big blister on her palm and for a second saw herself hemmed in by flames, heard the spurt and hiss of chemical, smelled the

singeing of her own hair while in her breast her heart thumped exultantly. It had all gone flat.

She answered him blurredly, "I can't say what I was getting near. Arthur had gone to town. I'd had to wash him out in any case. The only possibility sounds too mad to consider, but—oh, we have proved it wasn't you! Or we shall prove it soon."

"I think not," he said shortly. "Take my advice and let it drop. It's far better to leave it all to a decent counsel."

She beat her smarting palms on the table. "Oh, Derek, you utter fool, what can any counsel do for you? You may by a miracle get off at the assizes; but you'll be outlawed here, for the whole of your life. Our lives. You can't live at Chenerys—ever. Surely you've thought of that?"

"Of course. What's the good?"

She gave up argument, biting her lips to keep back the tears. After a brief battle she said, "Let it go for now. There's one other thing, though. I'd like you to tell me word for word exactly what you told the inspector. You know, about that hunt. If I could just be sure where we stand——?"

"Quite." He glanced again at the warder. "Well, you've had the bad luck yarn about the girths and so on. As far as I knew I was right out of the running. I came out of the timber and saw Tom on the ground. The way he was lying made me afraid he'd broken his neck. I'd just wiped the mud from his face when Ladbroke and Alison trotted into the open. Ladbroke had a look, said Tom was only stunned, and as he was asking if we could get help Glover suddenly appeared. I think that's about all."

Her breath caught. "How long were you alone with Tom?"

"Maybe three minutes. I didn't look at my watch."

Huskily she whispered, "Derek, is this all you said to the inspector? Absolutely the whole story?"

"Certainly," he answered, but his gaze quickened oddly.

She sat pulling at her gloves. "I see." She rose to her feet.

Derek stood up. The table made a wide barrier between them. Neither looked at the other. The warder held open the door.

Outside the gaol the sun was blindingly hot. Wynn felt dizzy and sick. *There was something Derek had kept back.*

"Oh, God," she prayed, "don't let it be that damned electric wiring!"

The door of the saddle-room was locked.

Alison turned furtively round, and saw Gregg beside her.

"Oh! Could I just take a peek at the hunting-saddles? I might even ask your advice. I wanted to order one, you know, as a present to my fiancé."

Had she been glib enough? She couldn't quite tell. Anyhow she had achieved her object. Brightening a little Gregg had got out a bunch of keys and was ushering her into the sun-specked dusk of the room. Saddles of various sorts were ranged against the walls.

"Try Riggs," said Gregg. "St. James's, you know. He's almost the only good, old-fashioned saddle-maker left in London." He slapped a gleaming, nut-brown saddle and stood mourning over it.

"Tom's," he informed her. "You won't do better than to have this copied."

"What a lot of funny straps!"

"Oh, just the usual. This fellow takes sandwiches as a rule." His hollow eyes were upon her. "I say, that was a baddish scare you two had last night. I always warned Tom about that wiring. What roused you, smoke?"

"I heard Wynn shout—and just in time, too. In another minute we'd have been cut off from the stairs, and a jump from the windows would have been fatal." She was uncomfortable, as she had been the previous evening when alone with Gregg in the shrubbery. At random she asked, "Whose saddle is this?"

"That? Oh, Derek's. Less good. And Wynn's been along to Gloucester, has she?"

Again he was pumping her for news, but it was not this which had swamped her in fresh consternation. Her sudden hunch had been right. Her riddle was now solved.

It had always puzzled her that no one seemed to have noticed an unsightly bulge in Derek's skin-tight hunting-coat. Obviously not. There had been no bulge. Here, secured by this strap, was how the tubular syringe had been carried.

She knew also how the syringe had fallen into Glover's hands. Hurriedly replaced, it had slipped loose, lain on the ground for Glover to pick up.

She jumped and dropped the saddle as though it had burnt her. The major himself was pottering in to join them.

"Back from Gloucester, what?" he opened. "She's seen him, then."

He did not pursue the topic. Instead he had fixed his monocle on the still swaying saddle. Still staring at it he touched abruptly on the fire.

"Been having a look at the damage on that landing. I know a bit about electric stuff. Those wires

are exposed. Any chance Padgett's been messing about with them ? "

Gregg answered, " I understand he was given strict orders to leave everything alone."

" Oh—ah ! "

The two friends exchanged glances. The atmosphere was heavily charged with embarrassment. For a second the major's gaze rested on Alison's warm cheeks, then it returned to the saddle. His stumpy finger poked at the high pommel. With a pointed change of subject he barked, " Who uses this, hey ? "

" Derek." Gregg fumbled his keys.

The major turned brick-coloured.

The three moved houseward, the major downcast, Gregg oddly smug. As they neared the entrance Wynn burst out excitedly.

" He's coming at nine," she announced, and looked sorry she had spoken. Her eye had taken in the fact that Alison was not alone.

Once more there was a covert interplay of glances. The meaning of it struck Alison full between the eyes. The major had been examining the big gap the fire had made in the wainscoting—*and he had some knowledge of electric lighting* ! He had seen, then, what she could only suspect—that last night's scare had been a frantic hoax.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HEADCORN sent the ray of his torch boring into the charred hole low down in the wainscoting. It shifted and for long moments picked out the coiled wires drawn forth and laid on crisp, blackened carpet. At last the livid beam cut a wide arc in the gloom. It played briefly on old hunting-prints, dim behind smoked glass, came to rest on the two watchers.

"Well?" breathed Wynn tensely.

For answer Headcorn touched a switch. Four brackets flooded the landing with light. Nothing wrong here. He rose, dusted his knees.

"And now, may I wash my hands? I know the way, thanks. I'll join you downstairs."

Miss Young looked glad to escape. It was Miss Marchmont who went against her will. He stood watching her descent. Desperately poised; stiff, daredevil neck, but the moist tendrils which clung to it feminine, vulnerable.

Ten minutes later he clumped down to the lounge.

Alison sniffed, and grew suddenly weak. A mingled aroma had greeted her nostrils. Morny's Eau de Cologne and—*petrol*? Both were on Wynn's dressing-table. A tall bottle, and a small red tin of especial Shell for filling cigarette lighters.

If Wynn noticed these odours she gave no sign.

"Was it the wiring?" she demanded.

"No." The inspector looked squarely at her. "I should call it the work of a rather bungling incendiary."

"Of course!" Wynn cried eagerly. "Who did it?"

Headcorn's gaze travelled from her face to the fists held rigid against the tweed of her skirt. "*Oh,*" groaned Alison, "*and she still hasn't seen!*"

"It was someone who knew our habits—the safe time to sneak in, where to hide, even which step creaked. And whoever it is, he wouldn't have taken the risk if he hadn't thought it vitally necessary. In short, while I go on living he's in danger."

Still the dull eyes looked down on her. "I can't see, Miss Marchmont, that you were on the verge of any drastic discovery."

"How do you know I wasn't?" she flared.

"Please ring for your butler."

Padgett when he entered did not meet Wynn's eye. However he answered the inspector readily enough.

"No one's touched the damage, sir. Mr. Gregg had a look, and later on Major Fitts. Only them two."

Wynn rounded on him. "Padgett! After my orders?"

The man looked abashed. "I was there both times, miss, to see nothing was disturbed."

The inspector's face was blank. "I should like to call back in an hour," he said and moved stodgily to the door.

He closed it behind him, noting the rather loud thud.

Out of the shadows of the drive Budworth stepped forward. He said, "I've seen the superintendent. Those two chaps are still at the Farmers' Subsidy meeting in Bewkesbury. They should be there another forty minutes at least if you want to get inside their premises."

"What about the housekeeper?"

"The major's? Still sleeping at her sister's, so that's all okay. Stop, I've more to tell you. Kings-

clere didn't get away yesterday. He drove to London this morning."

"Oh?" Headcorn considered this. "Right, Budworth. Go back to the car and keep well out of sight. Remember, I'd prefer this return-visit wasn't advertised."

Gregg's house was unlocked. So were its drawers, its cupboards and an old-fashioned safe. Through all of these the inspector plied rapidly. Soon the entire correspondence concerning the Chenerys' offer lay before him—with one signal exception. Though a carbon copy of an acknowledgment vouched for the first letter's receipt the letter itself was still missing. All else seemed in order. If there had been any mishandling of funds it would take an auditor to disclose it.

Keeping wary watch he crossed the dark meadows to Yew Lodge, where a scullery window let him in on pitch-gloom and silence punctuated by the drip-drip of a tap.

In the bedroom he stared a moment at *The West Counties Livestock* report, laid on the bedside table. In the study again he explored the table-drawer, taking longer than on the previous occasion. Its barrenness brought a frown. Unwilling to give up he pressed on with his unrewarding search in all likely and unlikely places. At last he unlatched the door, satisfied himself that its spring lock was secure, and quietly stole back in the direction he had come.

Midway the meadows he turned, ear cocked. The vague sound in the rear was not repeated; might indeed have been one of the hunters thudding in its box. He walked on to Chenerys.

Miss Marchmont let him in. Disregarding the question in her eyes he announced his intention of making a thorough-going search for a letter.

" A business letter. Have I your permission to go ahead ? "

" Certainly. Hunt where you like."

He had foreseen it would be useless, and useless it proved. He returned to the lounge.

" Miss Marchmont, I've a small inquiry to make of you. Have you met or heard of a Mr. James Elderson-Brown who, I understand, lunched here on a single occasion some time ago ? "

Her frown deepened. " Never. Who's he ? "

" If the name is unknown to you, it's hardly worth explaining. Will you give me your sister's London address ? "

" I'll write it down." She hesitated, eyes desperate again. " Inspector, aren't you going to look for—for fingerprints ? Anything at all that may give us a clue to last night ? "

His gaze moved from the ceiling to her white face. " There are no fingerprints on the landing," he said distinctly. " A careful search of the grounds will be made by daylight, but the paths are bone-dry. As for the fire itself, we may take it the carpet and woodwork in one spot were well drenched in petrol, but——"

" Petrol! I knew it. Well ? "

" A small quantity would have sufficed. It's old wood, you know. I was about to remark that petrol is easily come by, from a car or a garage. Even cleaning fluid would have served."

She flinched and left the room.

Alison Young once more kept well in the shadows. The inspector approached her, drawing a typed sheet from his pocket.

" This is your statement, Miss Young. Will you check it through and tell me if there is any detail you wish to alter or modify ? "

She had been dreading this moment. During the last hour she had heard from Wynn Derek's own account of certain happenings and had noted in a sickening flash the one glaring omission. Wynn, she believed, had also spotted it. *Derek had said not a word about walking across to his horse.* Had she, Alison, included that item in the information dragged from her in the garden ? She simply could not remember. Throughout the interview she had been so crushed, so muddled.

If she hadn't mentioned the incident, then the lie must be hers, not Derek's. Colin hadn't witnessed those preparations to mount and ride away. He had gone ahead down the slope. This was her own small, ghastly corner. She took the sheet, battling to keep her hand steady.

Near the foot of the page she saw it :

" *I lagged behind. I saw the kneeling man get up, go over to the brown horse and put his foot in the stirrup. When we reached the field I was rather astonished to find him back again, bending over his brother.*"

The print eddied before her. In the office doorway she saw Wynn, watching her like a hawk. Out of a parched throat she whispered :

" It seems quite correct."

From now on it was as though her brain ceased to function.

Daylight filtering through the curtains. The numbness had gone. She grew dimly aware of—was it a queer, obscure flaw ? Nothing in it, of course. And yet . . .

" Suppose Derek isn't lying ! Suppose I'm the one who's wrong ? "

Preposterous ! She had seen, oh, plainly ! There was no doubt, none whatever, about that pink-

coated figure stalking stiffly up to the darker horse, getting ready to mount, pausing to glance round . . .

She gave a violent start. It was to-day that Derek would appear before the magistrate's court. Only for a formal reading of evidence ; but what evidence ! She thought in horror of her own words as they would sound to all listeners.

Down she stole to the telephone. She knew where the inspector was stopping, not in Bewkesbury as before, but at an inn some ten miles to the east. It was only seven. She would be sure to catch him.

She pushed open the office door and drew back. Wynn was there, just clamping down the microphone—Wynn, with her gay, parrot dressing-gown dangling from her shoulders. The dead eyes met hers.

" Gone," announced Wynn. " Back to London. That shows you see, what he thinks of our fire."

With choking gasps she began to laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BRIGHT sun in the lounge.

"DEAR INSPECTOR,"—Alison wrote—"About that statement I signed. I'm not quite satisfied, though I hardly know how to explain. I think I've got it pinned down to the word 'astonished,' though even there I may be wrong. Certainly when I got near enough to see who the kneeling man was I got a definite shock of surprise. But why? There's my whole difficulty.

"Was it due to the fact that five minutes before I'd seen him about to ride off? Or because subconsciously I'd been expecting not Derek but someone different? I wish I could be sure, but it's hopeless. The more I think the harder knots my brain ties itself into. And no one can help me. Colin, you remember, didn't stop to see that final bit. Call me an idiot if you like. It all sounds awfully silly; and yet it keeps bothering me. I can't help feeling the truth about my reaction may be frightfully important.

"There's just one other point . . ."

Blast! Pen gone dry, and no ink in the silver inkwell. There was a bottle in the office. She pressed the nib into it, and turned to re-enter the lounge.

Someone had come in. To her sun-dazzled eyes the form at the table was only a blur. Its stooped back straightened, faced round.

"Oh," said she flatly, "it's you."

Gregg. Smiling, as usual, and wearing the air of

elaborate self-effacement she had grown vaguely to dislike ; but his skin ! Bleached, like old putty. The notion she had dismissed as ridiculous took palpable form. He *had* been reading her letter !

" Wynn anywhere about ? "

It sounded a trumped-up excuse.

" At the stables, I think."

" Oh ? I'll have a look for her there."

He had been gripping his pipe rather rigidly. Now he dropped it into his side pocket, and strolled out. The casualness seemed a bit overdone.

Swiftly she examined her unfinished page. Its position was slightly altered. In a searing flash she thought, " He wasn't hunting that day."

Never before had she laid stress on this fact, though, to be sure, she had taken her cue from those about her. *Someone near—someone trusted—someone in the know . . .*

At all that long distance she could not have distinguished one pink coat from another. Could Gregg have changed his clothing and cut across to that field ?

" No ! Because he didn't ride away. There were only those two horses—unless there was a third in among the trees. That's thin, too. How could a man on horseback cross open fields and a lane and not be seen ? All these gardeners and farmboys. And the man himself in a scarlet coat ! "

Still, the possibility of a third horse enchained her. And then Gregg's height. The same as Derek's. She had noticed it when she had seen the two men standing side by side. She bit her lip. This last item, curiously enough, failed to assist. What was the matter with it ?

She completed her letter, marking the interruption with a cross and inserting an explanatory note. Still

in a deep fog she posted the communication in the red box by the gates, came back into the lounge and hunted on the table for Tom's album of snapshots.

It was spread open before her when Wynn entered from outside. Carelessly she asked, "Look, Wynn, is this the hunter Derek usually rides?"

Wynn glanced down at the snapshot. It showed Derek standing beside a dark gelding.

"Always, that is lately. Tom kept it for him." She shut her eyes as though the sight hurt and moved to the fire-place.

Not one question. A bad symptom, this utter lack of curiosity, though for present purposes a relief . . .

"I thought so. By the way, how tall is Derek?"

Wynn's eyes stared vacantly at some vision in space. A sleep-walker's eyes, blank in a small, pinched face.

"What was that you asked me?"

Alison noticed that the hand which thrust back the matted curls was grubby, and that the drab breeches were soiled at the knees. She repeated her question.

"How tall? Five ten and a half." A flat statement.

"I'd never looked at these snaps. Are there any others?"

"Not that I've seen." With another wrench Wynn muttered, "I must wash." But still she made no move.

Alison gazed bemusedly at the picture before her. "Gregg was hunting for you. Did you see him?"

A deadened pause. "Gregg? Oh, yes, it's not easy to miss seeing him these last days. And the major," Wynn added indifferently.

Now their world had so signally narrowed it should

have been a comfort to have two such faithful supporters always within reach. Why was it only irksome ? Alison believed it was the feeling she had of being watched. As though each of the two men was keeping a weather eye out for some calamity which if sensed in time might be averted.

She turned a page. Arthur Kingsclere, in a group. Much taller. Oh, quite six feet two ! She closed the album and got up.

" How on earth," she asked, " did you manage to collect all that grime ? Oil, too."

Again the long pause. " Tinkering up the Austin." Wynn roused, levelled her eyes on her friend and without change of tone said, " Why must you stay here ? "

It was the flick of a wet towel. Wynn had been so decent ! And then Alison understood. Her unspoken disbelief in the door-closing story had somehow communicated itself. She stammered.

" Would you rather I went ? "

" Yes, for your sake—and Colin's. How do you know what you may run into down here ? "

" Oh, that ! " Alison sighed with relief. " If you aren't frightened, I guess I'm not either." Still this had given her the opening she sought. " Honestly, though, are you yourself likely to accomplish any good by sticking in this house ? "

" Read this," said Wynn curtly and held out a small sheet of blue notepaper she had kept crumpled up in her hand.

It was a crude note from Miss Joscelyn of Wimbledon, dispensing with Wynn's services.

" So now you know," grated Wynn. " I'm homeless—till I land another job. And how soon shall I manage that ? "

" Wynn," Alison begged, " let's think this out."

"Don't try," said Wynn briefly and walked up the stairs.

Alison moved towards the telephone, but remembered that not till one o'clock could she hope to catch Colin. She set out for Yew Lodge, and in the Chenerys' grounds came upon the man she was now seeking, heading vaguely for home. Dawdling dejectedly, prodding the meadow grass with his stick.

A point-to-point had been scheduled for to-day, but the major apparently had no heart for it. In fact just of late she had not seen him a single time on a horse. She was struck by the deep cleft between his brows as he looked up at her approach.

"So you and Wynn haven't gone to Gloucester for the—the hearing. Glad of that. Too painful. Were you coming to see me?"

"I was, actually. I've got somehow to kill time. Didn't you say something once about showing me your photographs?"

"The Indian ones?" He brightened. "Right!"

They passed through a gate into Fitts's own paddock. She touched the major's arm and pointed to the two fine glossily-brown hunters cropping grass at the far end.

"Beautiful horses! Can't we go and talk to them?"

"Certainly. No, better not just now." He was tugging his watch into view. "I've got Crump feeding with me. Oh, no, there'll be time for the photos while we're having a glass of sherry."

There were seven full albums, two of them containing local snaps. She hoped she was not displaying too great an interest in the latter; though why bother? Her companion could not possibly guess the reason. Anyhow the type of picture she had wanted to find was not here.

"Something's wrong with my shutter," she remarked. "I was going to see if Mr. Gregg could put it right."

"Gregg!" he snorted. "Better bring it along to me. Gregg's no interest in cameras. I presented him with a splendid one—German, you know—and he's never troubled to snap one view."

"Well, here's the vicar coming. No, no more sherry, thanks. Besides," she explained, "I don't like leaving Wynn alone for very long."

"Quite!" He eyed her oddly. "Just so . . ."

She felt suddenly chilled. "Major, what exactly do you mean?"

He took her arm, dropped it. "Wanted to ask," he mumbled. "Since that scare you had with the fire. Is she taking any especial precautions? Locking windows and so on?"

"I haven't noticed anything like that."

He nodded to himself. "No. I see . . . Bad show. Rotten bad. For her, you understand. Oh, not the chance of her being dragged into things! The—the other thing. Felt it for days. Haven't you?"

"Felt what?" Her mouth was dry.

"Her hopelessness. Gregg spoke of it only this morning. But I'm talking nonsense. She'll be all right. She's got you with her. That's what I told Gregg. No matter what her state of mind is, so long as there's a sensible girl right at her elbow——"

She waited for no more. Smothered by her heart-beats she tore homeward—to her friend . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY

REGINALD HARDMORE, Land Agent and Surveyor, eyed his official visitor with puzzled relief. The Chenerys' matter was all washed up, he said, but he would place the entire correspondence at the inspector's disposal.

The opening letter, dated March 21st, gave less enlightenment than Headcorn had hoped. Hardmore, on his client's behalf, had wanted to know if an offer would be considered, and referred to the occasion—date unspecified—when Mr. James Elderson-Brown had called on a friend, Mr. William Mitford, then staying at Chenerys, had been kindly invited for lunch and afterwards was shown over the estate. That was all.

Looking up Headcorn remarked that the property seemed to have made a striking impression. "Is it possible that your client intended to buy without further examination?"

Mr. Hardmore admitted that the procedure was unusual. "Though one does find now and then a man who makes these instantaneous decisions. All I know is that Mr. Elderson-Brown had only a very brief time in England before returning abroad. He told me he had many matters claiming attention and would like this one settled for him very quickly."

"Is he a regular client of yours?"

"Oh, not at all. He happened along during a motor tour which, I understood, was of a business nature."

"Did he strike you as—shall we say an eccentric person?"

The agent considered. "Well, no. I concluded he was representing a syndicate. One of these heavily-capitalised farming affairs, you know, that go about buying up land and making big-scale developments. It wasn't what his own profession suggested; but I gathered he was on the verge of retirement."

"What is his profession?" inquired the inspector, interested.

"Why, an engineer of sorts. Working very largely out of England, having indeed no permanent address in this country. Here was where I could reach him."

Hardmore fished a card from a drawer in his mahogany desk. In the lower corner was engraved, "*Empire Builders' Club, London, W.*1."

"However," continued Hardmore, "I never had to use that address. He advised us that while he was motoring in Shropshire it would save time if he simply called in to get our replies. In the end he didn't come at all. He telephoned instead."

"So that you actually saw him only the one time? I see. And this information about himself—did you check up on it?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I rang up the firm which has employed him for the past twenty years—British Development Company, Shell Mex Building, Strand. He was entirely okay."

The inspector re-examined the letters, particularly Gregg's answers. There was no doubt that Gregg had been eager to close with the offer. In his second communication it might be suspected that he had softened a firm refusal on his employer's part into approximate encouragement; and his latest suggested that a slightly larger price might just tip the scales.

"And now, Hardmore, can you give me a description of Mr. Elderson-Brown?"

"Well—just the single glimpse, inspector! It was nearly two months ago."

"Age?" hinted the inspector helpfully.

"At a rough guess, between forty-five and fifty. Slender build, I think. I don't know that anything struck me especially; except, perhaps, his bad colour. The sort of dark, sallow skin one gets from quinine and the tropics. I couldn't tell you about his eyes. They were darkened all round which gave them a deep-set look, but that may have been due to the sun-glasses he was wearing."

"Oh!" A thoughtful pause. "Did you notice his car?"

The car, Hardmore said, had been left a little way down the street. One additional detail he remembered. Mr. Elderson-Brown had thinning, nondescript hair, noticeable when he turned to go out.

"What's that, Inspector? Oh, clothes! Tweeds, I should say, good style, by no means new. Yes, and an oldish Burberry. Height! M-m-m—average? I think so. Maybe my secretary can help us out."

The secretary was even more vague in her recollections of the client. Over the telephone calls, however, she made a better showing.

"Not local ones," she declared. "If he was in Shrewsbury what was to stop him coming to the office? Besides every time he rang up I remember having to wait."

The final call, Hardmore recalled, had followed directly on the last communication from Chenerys, Gregg's letter dated April 14th, the day of Tom Boldre's first accident.

"I read it over the wire. Mr. Elderson-Brown was quite short about it. He told me he had offered every

penny the property was worth, had just seen another place he liked even better—and, in a word, called the whole deal off."

From the telephone-exchange Headcorn obtained a list of the non-local calls put through to Hardmore during a given period. When the identifiable ones had been eliminated the four assumed to be Elderson-Brown's were seen to have come from public booths, widely distributed, none in the Sompton area.

"Nothing in it." The rumble of the London-bound express played a tune on the words. "Queer, perhaps, but quite remote from our two murders."

In Cadogan Gardens he paid a call on Mrs. Boldre. Sleekly handsome in a smart black dinner-gown she was apparently about to dine out.

"Elderson-Brown?" She stared with all her former dense insolence. "Never heard of him." She ground out her cigarette.

"He seems to have been acquainted with your friend Mr. William Mitford."

"Bill Mitford! He's dead."

Dead! Here was a setback.

"When did he die?" As Mrs. Boldre remained stubbornly silent, Headcorn added pointedly, "You wish, I suppose, to assist your brother-in-law's defence in every possible way?"

"Don't! Can't you see I'm trying to think?" Crossly she snapped, "It was last autumn. Pneumonia. It must have been six months before that when he last came to us. How can you expect me to remember some man he dragged in just for a meal?"

"Elderson-Brown," repeated the inspector hypnotically. "Living abroad. An engineer——"

Her eyes had strayed past him. He turned and saw Kingsclere coming quietly into the room.

"Quite, Inspector." The young man nodded. "Elderson-Brown. I happened, you see, to be lunching at Chenerys that same day. What about him?"

"Only that I would like any available information. His appearance, what he talked about, any questions he may have asked concerning the estate."

Kingsclere said, "It's a long time ago." His eyes took on a veiled expression.

"Even a slight recollection would help. You do recall the name and the occasion. Anythng besides?"

Tall, immaculately cool, Kingsclere stood there thinking it over. Or thinking what not to say? It was impossible to read what went on behind the black, double-breasted dinner-jacket, the Saxon, sunburned features.

"Sorry, Inspector. Beyond the name my memory's a blank."

Wearily, Headcorn set forth on a round of further inquiries.

Back in his office at Scotland Yard at last, he found a message in answer to inquiries made to the Shrewsbury police, and another from the superintendent at Bewkesbury. Both reports were barren. Only one tiny item emerged: none of the telephoning had been done on a hunt day.

On his desk lay a grey envelope marked Personal. He scowled over its enclosure, gave brief attention to the heavily-inked cross and the appended explanation and laid the note aside. That poor American girl! Bludgeoning her wits, and to no purpose.

He picked up the page again and for long moments sat pondering it.

Dr. Ladbroke peered into a jammed compartment and whistled.

"You here, Inspector? Blow the expense, let's go first."

Farther up the train the two travellers found an empty first-class carriage and sank into it with relief.

"And what's your reason for making this journey?" asked Headcorn curiously.

"Me? Oh, call it rescue work!" Colin lit a cigarette. "I've had an S.O.S. from Alison. We're going to haul Wynn Marchmont up to town if it's possible to talk sense into her. You've seen her since the fire. What's your verdict?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Meaning you're damned sure in your own mind that Wynn's been laying a false trail. I confess something of the sort did occur to me. Knowing this, though, doesn't make the other business any less rotten."

"I understand," muttered Headcorn tactfully.

"Do you? I doubt it," said Colin curtly. He tossed his cigarette on to the platform and lit another with angry fingers. As the train moved out he continued, "I'm not talking now about the accused being my friend. It's the fiendish boycott of those two girls. Why, they might be plague-sufferers! No," he corrected, "that's not it either. The really poisonous thing is the attitude of the only remaining sympathisers—that damned agent, and his pal Major Fitts. Are you aware that team may do worse harm than all the turncoats put together?"

The inspector withdrew his eyes from the window. "In what way?"

"General atmosphere. It must be pretty bad to throw a girl like Alison into a panic. Well-intentioned, I daresay, but . . . it can't go on, Headcorn! All this blasted supervision—hints, too,

fairly broad ones. Can't you see it's a crime to suggest Wynn will probably kill herself if she's allowed the chance ? "

"That won't happen!" hurled the inspector. "No! Or if it did——" He stopped, strangely shaken.

He was remembering the superintendent's words. Mitcham, also, had guessed the origin of the fire . . . "*Or if it did*——" he repeated.

"Exactly." The doctor's tone was grim. "It would mean just the one thing. That the girl herself knows Derek hasn't the devil of a chance. That she wangled the fire as a last desperate throw, found it didn't work, and has thrown up the sponge. It might even be said she had been a silent partner in the murders."

"And with excellent excuse. One has always," Headcorn added under his breath, "had to face some such eventuality. Lord, this train's stuffy!" He mopped savagely at his brow.

Colin examined him with interest. "And you," he demanded. "What's taking you back again? Oh, I see, as usual you're not saying! Sometimes I think you carry this caginess too far. Don't you realise that your stumping off and leaving those girls the other night without ever committing yourself one way or the other was about the essence of brutality ? "

Mildly the inspector returned. "Was it ? It would have been more brutal to say what was in my mind. Let me remind you, the case against Boldre is just where it was. If, as I fully expect, my new inquiries in no way impinge on it——"

"New inquiries! You've struck something, then ? For God's sake, open up ! "

Cautiously the detective complied. Colin listened, now eager, now damped.

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"Stop! What you've just said hands us a most substantial reason for getting Tom Boldre out of the way. Derek, of course, could have been easily managed if he'd stuck to his expressed views about selling. Glover, in and out of Gregg's house, simply picked up some secret correspondence, opened blackmail and got pipped off for his pains. The land-syndicate sounds most plausible. It's run by Elderson-Brown himself, who in return for services rendered by Gregg—but don't you see, it's not a question of impersonation or not. It's a fifty-fifty conspiracy. Establish your connection between these two men and——"

"Not so fast. First let me tell you that Elderson-Brown is teetotally knocked out. Has been since the tenth of this month. He's under very strict medical observation.

"All I got from a shut-mouthed manager at his firm was the assurance that Elderson-Brown's nursing-home expenses are being borne by British Developments Limited."

"Oh? They must regard him as a valuable employee."

"The manager's own words. I was told that Elderson-Brown was the company's most important expert in one particular line. No hint of what I've subsequently learned—that the man has been playing merry hell with cash and behaving like the Baron Munchausen on a jag. Does that convey anything to you?"

The doctor's eyes were steel slits. "Make it explicit."

"I will. In the Royal Hotel, Bath, he engaged the best suite, where he gave champagne suppers to chance acquaintances. Hired a chauffeur-driven car—and left behind him a number of dud cheques.

In Bristol he repeated the programme with variations, after which comes a gap covering our entire Shrewsbury affair. Next what? We find him back in London. He signs a lease for a whole floor in a new Kingsway office-building, lays down carpets an inch thick and orders in *three hundred adding machines*!"

"Three hundred . . . Headcorn! Where's this lunatic now?"

"I'll tell you. Ever heard of a pleasant retreat in Woking, run by one Dr. John Nugent?"

"Nugent! God, that's torn it . . . probably means he's hopeless."

There was a bottomless pause.

"So you see," observed the inspector dryly, "the exact degree of importance we can attach to this engineer's conduct in the immediate past. The flourish of buying the Boldre estate makes a harmonious note in the picture. For conscience's sake I've got Reginald Hardmore meeting me this evening at Bewkesbury. It's only fair, though, to warn you I'm not building on his making any identification."

Hunched in his corner seat, Colin lit cigarettes, threw them away.

The morning papers had reported a remand, but there could be little doubt that in five days from now Derek Boldre would be committed for trial at the Old Bailey.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It was the complete apathy which terrified. One spoke to Wynn, she seemed never to hear.

This time, though, was an exception. She was answering, her voice coming from an immeasurable distance.

" Village ? Of course. I'll get out the car."

She had poured tea for the major. He had lingered long and finally—with what visible reluctance !—faded away. Alison's suggestion appeared to have touched some spring. A mechanism inside was directing her stiffly from her seat out of the house, round to the garage.

Now to make sure ! Swiftly, with shame, Alison flew into the office, opened the bottom drawer of the filing-cabinet. She gazed a moment at Tom's revolver. So Wynn's aimlessly-intent prowling hadn't meant anything after all. Briefly she toyed with the idea of locking this drawer and taking away the key. No ! If Wynn noticed, that alone might start wrong notions. . . .

Yet, hadn't she searched for sleeping-drugs, borrowed Wynn's safety-razor and hidden it deep under a pile of manuscripts ? Last night she had hardly dozed, braced to spring up at the first sound of that creaking stair.

Well, by midnight Colin would be with them. Her responsibility would at least be shared with someone not only a doctor but an exceptionally sane, understanding person. If between them they could make Wynn see she would serve a better purpose talking to lawyers in town and sheltering in her friend's cheerful flat . . .

Gregg again ? Of course. She had known he'd be turning up before long, undeceivingly casual, inventing thin excuses to account for his presence. Standing by the table he let his roving eye gravitate downwards till it rested on her empty hands.

" Wynn's off somewhere, I see. By herself is it ? "

" With me," she snapped. " To the chemist's."

" Chemist's ! " He echoed the word softly, a gleam leaping in his fixed gaze.

" Oh, don't you understand ? " she whispered, exasperated. " I suggested it. It's only to get her out for a little. We must somehow shake her out of herself."

His slow nod infuriated her. Altogether too comprehending ; and how it damned her small efforts ! He raised his brows.

" Taken a look at the sky ? "

" No. What's wrong with it ? "

She stepped outside. Goodness, how it had darkened ! Bruised clouds rested almost on the treetops. They were in for a flood.

Gregg advised, " Better wait. That Austin leaks like a sieve."

" Oh, we'll beat this, I think ! If we don't who cares ? "

She got her coat from the cupboard, and when she emerged Gregg had vanished. These muted comings and goings ! The office door, closed a moment ago, was ajar, and now, from inside it was pushed gently to. Her thoughts flew to the loaded Colt lying there for any one to take.

Instinctively she took two steps towards the office only to draw back. Supposing Gregg had suddenly decided to remove a possible temptation, did she want to confront him in the very act ?

Minutes passed, and still the door remained

closed. Some voice surely not her own whispered inside her brain, "*But Gregg did read my letter to the inspector.*" And he had turned that queer, ashy colour.

She felt again the brief doubt which had so quickly seemed childish, and with the return of it a new creepiness ran along her skin. What if the inspector was mistaken about the "bungling incendiary?" Who lighted that blaze? Not Wynn at all, but someone else who had stolen in, lain low, made this attempt to burn two persons in their beds?

A faint *ting* told her the telephone-receiver was being replaced. Bitterly she laughed. So that was all Gregg was doing, making a call. Another mad mist blown to naught, along with her foolish gropings for what she had so desperately prayed might be truth.

Gregg was back, his right hand in a pocket that sagged heavily. Fingering his pipe? She'd seen him do it fifty times, though not surely with such a noticeable bulge where his hand nested. On the stone steps at her side he seemed to be listening. His cavernous eyes trained watchfully on the gates leading to the garage; and suddenly it struck her that Wynn was taking ages over the car. Another thought hit her broadside. Gregg had seen Wynn going into the garage. He had also hunted her up the day before when she was fiddling with the Austin—and now he was trying to stop them driving off . . .

Horror slammed down on her. "I'd better see," she muttered, and then went limp with relief. Here was the small car crawling through the gates, Wynn at the wheel.

She got in, banged the door. "Well, shall we race the storm?"

Back in the old, dull torpor, Wynn drooped in her

seat, tousled curls over her brow, eyes the exact colour of the heavens which pressed, like the lid of a box, over the livid, waiting world. Wearing the soft, beautifully-cut suit that was neither brown nor green but a haunting mixture of the two ; tanned throat bare above the trim-moulded collar. If she had noticed Gregg she had given no sign ; and now he was withdrawn into the house. Her hands went on resting, inert, on the steering-wheel. Without stirring she spoke.

" You were interested in those snapshots. Why ? "

" Was I ? " Alison flooded a guilty red. And Wynn had seemed so utterly incurious !

" In the ones with horses," said Wynn in the same even, dead tone. " And you asked about Derek's height."

The inspector had simply ignored her letter. That showed her how footling it was. Vague, fatuous . . . Wynn mustn't know.

The girl at her elbow was speaking, detachedly. " I suppose you realise hunters don't differ much in size."

" Yes ! That's why I——"

A deliverance ! Out of the rhododendrons, panting with haste, popped Major Fitts, for all the world like a Jack-in-the-box. For once Alison could have hugged him. In another second she would have blurted out what could only lead to yet another shattering disappointment ; for if the dim uncertainty did still stick in her mind, how could it ever be resolved ?

" What, not shoving off into this, surely ? You'll be drowned." The major glared at them through a quickly-screwed monocle.

Not answering, Wynn stared straight through the ruffled figure in their path as though he had not been

there at all. Alison explained, and saw a sharpness leap into the major's gaze.

"Oh, not far, eh? I'll come with you. Save getting out my bus, if you think . . . God, look at that!"

Pale lightning snicked above them. There came a deafening cannonade of thunder and the crack of a struck chestnut tree. It might have been the signal for which Wynn was waiting. Off lurched the Austin, the major scuttling to safety. Alison had barely time to take in the fact that Gregg had reappeared in the doorway and that some consoling message had been telegraphed him before the major had caught nimbly on to the running-board and was scrambling into the rear seat.

"We'll chance it," he gasped. "As it's only to the chemist's."

Who had said chemist's? Village was the word Alison had used.

And now it flashed on her. Unable to prevent them going, Gregg had done some quiet telephoning with the result that the major had hurried here on the hop. He was going to make sure no lethal mixture was passed to Wynn over Mr. George Burt's counter. Though what did the strict drug-laws allow one to buy, except fly-papers or maybe spirits of salts?

Seething, Alison stole a glance at her companion's face. It was stern-eyed but distrait; so her wrath simmered down. There was this about it, the major's presence shut down on awkward topics.

In the lane the hedges raised high, dust-powdered barricades. No leaf rustled; the gully had dried to a trickle. On they rattled, past the cracked scum of a pond at the crossroads, past the squat church and the wilting hyacinths on Tom's grave. Uphill, into Sompton's sleepy huddle of shops.

The major was out, leaning in on them. "What can I fetch you?"

Wynn had already slid to the cobbles. "Don't trouble," came over her shoulder as she led the way into the little general emporium. From its door two tall forms had emerged, holding grave, hushed conference. Ted Horrocks, and . . . ?

The other man was Arthur Kingsclere.

No reason why the sight of him when she had so confidently supposed him in far-distant London should bring Alison a queer shock. It was proof only of the humpy state she had got into of late. She noticed the major seemed unsurprised, but then nothing much went on unbeknownst to him. Now as Wynn with a bare nod passed into the shop he lingered outside for an exchange of remarks. On the two younger men an awkward silence had fallen, but their gazes—Ted's strained and like a hurt child's, Arthur's completely shuttered—followed Wynn's stalking form.

It was doubtful if the object of their concern had taken any of this in. Her mood was too indrawn to let pinpricks disturb her. She was standing now in the dead centre of the shop, which reeked stuffily of Lifebuoy soap, dog biscuit and cardboard boxes. Arms at her sides, she was still in her sleepwalker's dream. The proprietor glanced at her uncertainly and turned his attention to Alison.

"Oil of citronelle—oh, very good for midge bites, I assure you!—and aspirin. Thank *you*! And will that be all you ladies are requiring?"

"All to-day, thanks."

George Burt creased the white paper with precision, bound it trimly with red string, fashioned a painstaking loop. None of his usual gush of amenities; instead, slow motion and a troublesome

cough. Package in hand he, too, seemed to have fallen into a stupor.

Alison jogged him. "Haven't I some change?"

"Oh, pardon!" Contritely Mr. Burt counted out silver. Another hesitant glance and he leant forward to hiss confidentially, "Those films major Fitts was inquiring about. They're in at last, so would you ladies care to take them? As I was explaining, we have to send them away to be developed, and sometimes——"

Films! Whose films?

Wynn's head had turned, but the major, now inside, was brushing past and up to the counter.

"Tom's," he whispered in Alison's ear. "I told Gregg I'd pick 'em up. Post 'em along to Pat, you know. Last lot he took. How much, Burt? No, no, I'll see to this! Like to."

Tossing down a pound note he held out his hand for a folder just produced from a jumble of corn-plasters and fishing flies.

"Why you?" Crisply Wynn interposed, and a two-shilling piece rang on the glass. "Thanks, George."

She had possessed herself of the grey envelope and walked out of the shop. The major, his kind action foiled, fussed back to the car.

On the pavement by the entrance Wynn was examining a series of small prints. Her expression was utterly blank.

"May I see?" murmured Alison.

Their eyes met. A wild gust swept litter in their faces as mutely, one by one, Wynn handed over the pictures, not many, so the film must have been taken unfinished from Tom's camera. The first showed a brace of Sealyham pups. The second, Pat on her ebony-black hunter. The third . . .

This man! Beside his horse, foot in stirrup, elbow rigidly jutting—*who was he?*

Sompton High Street swam. Banging blinds overhead, George Burt's scarlet geraniums, the major busily adjusting car-windows, all spun an insane tarantelle—and through the confusion grey searchlights pierced.

"Well——?"

"It is!" Alison gasped. "Oh, Wynn, it is——"

"Look again. *Are you sure?*"

Speech shut down. Here was the major closing in on them, eye-glass screwed for a squint. Even as she clutched the evidence to her breast raindrops spattered, a fierce fusillade.

"Let's get back," barked Fitts and trotted to the Austin.

Alison sought counsel; but Wynn, her eyes glittering, had jammed the prints in her pocket and was ducking for her seat.

The nudge was unwanted. What, breathe a hint of this—now? Home. The telephone. The man himself could not possibly be forewarned, ignorant as he was of that final glimpse from the hilltop.

Demon gale flinging grit on prudently-closed panes; cigarette from the rear fugging the air, steady reminder of the sort of conduct to be preserved. All as before—in spite of singing blood and hearts that clamoured. Gregg would be snug in his own quarters. The office would be theirs. Ring the inspector—tell him at once of this idiot's blunder, sealed up, buried beyond hope of discovery but for this silly bit of luck. . . .

Good old Austin! Squeaking, vibrating, but managing fifty-five. The lodge-gates beaten by rain. One minute more. . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

HEADCORN leapt from the still-moving train, grabbed the arm of the man making ready to scan the arrivals.

"Got your car, Hardmore? Let's hurry along."

Z-z-t! Blinding light on the dark platform. Thunder like a rifle-crack was followed by the splintering of glass.

"Any great rush, Inspector?"—but already Headcorn had pushed past the barrier with Colin close at his heels. The taxi-rank had melted. Not a vehicle remained save the new Rover car, on which the owner cast dubious glances.

"Oh, well, I'll risk it—if anything's up?"

No answer from the detective. The trio piled inside just as the rain crashed with avalanche force on the roof.

Green lanes had turned into torrents. The open country was a sea. Colin rubbed the fogged glass at his side, but even now could not distinguish the familiar landmarks.

Tudor chimneys and a yew hedge making themselves visible through the mist. Now the turn into the wider road. In front Headcorn was saying explicitly:

"Mr. Hardmore, don't forget you're to be taken as my official subordinate. Look carefully at these men as I present them, but say nothing till we're alone."

"More than a single possibility, then? Sort of identification parade, in fact. Well, I'll know Elderson-Brown if I see him. These gates, Inspector?"

Under tossing chestnuts, past flowerbeds beaten to pulp, up to the house. Drive plastered with petals like confetti after a wet wedding—and here, midway the drive, a pale, streamlined car, its sole occupant snugly closed in behind the wheel. Colin muttered under his breath.

" It's Kingsclere. Headcorn, wasn't he in town ? "

As the Rover drew alongside the ash-blond head turned warily. As the glass lowered in response to the inspector's signal Colin noticed the sharp narrowing of Kingsclere's eyes, the furtive dig Hardmore had received in the ribs. He watched while the young man strained his ears to catch the question shouted above the pelting rain.

" I'm waiting for them now," came the steady answer. " I left them in the village a few minutes ago."

" Were they walking, then ? " yelled Colin.

The cool gaze turned on him. " Oh, no, they had the car." A pause. " They're all right," said Kingsclere quietly. " Fitts had them in tow."

By his annoyance as by his relief Colin realised the magnitude of his own fear obsession. The next moment, seeing the pale uneasy face of the butler look inquiry from the house door, he wondered if Kingsclere had spoken the truth.

" The ladies, sir ? " Padgett cupped his ear. " Not in, certainly ; and I couldn't tell you where they was heading. Mr. Gregg may know. He was in front when they started out."

" I see. Will Mr. Gregg be at his own place ? "

" Yes, sir. Take the left fork."

Headcorn signalled, and the Rover, edging past the Rolls-Bentley, swerved off the main drive. " Well ? " he challenged.

" Oh, nothing like ! " declared Hardmore posi-

tively. "This chap's too young, too fair, and I'd say, half a foot over Elderson-Brown's height."

Floods lashed the car as it crunched into the narrower alley, stiff foliage scraped the mud-guards. Presently, through a grey gossamer of rain, the agent's cottage emerged, water spouting from its eaves. Headcorn was out, hammering with the iron knocker, while in the back of the car Colin sat braced for the test he had been dreading. On the coming moments, he reasoned, his friend's life must depend.

Hardmore stirred suspiciously. "Long time answering. Think he's looked out and seen who we are?"

The same idea was rousing hope in the doctor's breast. Long indeed! Those thunderous knocks ought to wake the dead.

"See"—warningly. "He's just opening the door."

In six inches aperture Gregg's features appeared, lean, saturnine, darkly sallow.

"Oh! You again, Inspector?"

The drawled greeting was easy, but the deep-sunk eyes strayed past to the dim occupants of the Rover, and as Headcorn spoke the smile on Gregg's face became more arid. For a second only the door space widened. Then it contracted and the man inside sidled away from the driving torrents. The movement revealed the fact that his right hand nestled into a heavily-bagging pocket. Now he was answering, his words just carrying above the deluge.

"Chemist's," he said. "Must have got hung up after this broke. Are you sure they've not come in?"

"Quite. Then they didn't intend a longer excursion?"

"I gathered not. Fitts was with them, of course," said the agent with meaning.

Colin as he heard the plural pronoun felt a new, stabbing alarm. Was Gregg trying to convey that Alison herself was courting danger while in her hostess's company, and that only the presence of a third person could guarantee safety?

With a jolt he remembered the purpose of their visit. Hardmore was staring fixedly, his expression that of wavering indecision. He looked back to the half-concealed figure in the doorway and saw what had till now escaped notice—the slow trickle of water, oozing in an outward direction, towards the sill. It dripped from Gregg's clothing. Why, the fellow was soaked!

"Odd," drawled the tired voice again. "A moment ago I'd have sworn I heard a car shoving into the garage. Just over there, you know. Shall I see if they're inside sheltering till this holds up?"

"We'll do that," said Headcorn tersely, but he remained where he stood, a stolid, streaming monument.

Gregg appeared to jump at the suggestion. "Drive round. I'll cut across and join you." He ducked, slamming the door.

The inspector resumed his seat. "Yes?" asked he softly.

Hardmore hesitated. "Don't quite know. Difficult with this curtain of rain; and he kept dodging back. Right colouring. Right height, I think, and certainly it's the hair, getting thin on top, as I said. When I've got a close-up on him——"

"Close-up!" snapped the doctor. "God, don't you see that's what he's had of you? The man's been in the open during the last few minutes. He's

armed. Right now he's skinning out the back way. Let me get out ! "

He was hurling himself into the rain when a rough clutch hauled him back.

" Get moving," ordered the inspector sternly, and now Colin saw that Gregg was issuing forth again, though in a black rubber cape with a flapping sou'wester obscuring his features. Shouting a direction, he trotted from view into a clump of sopping lilacs. All at once the girls' absence assumed terrifying significance. Kingsclere, stationed watchfully in the drive, the shut-faced butler concernedly peering—what did it mean ?

The Rover circled back, entered the stable-yard gates, and stopped on the worn bricks. No sign of Gregg, and the garage doors closed. Sodden desolation on every side. All Colin heard was the steady downpour as it sluiced upon the uneven red-tiled roofs and, from unseen boxes, muffled stampings and whinnyings. Yet the inspector seemed to be listening.

" Shut off your engine." He slid down the pane.

A gate in the opposite wall scraped inwards. Gregg slipped through, a weird apparition in glistening black oilskins. He paused, cocked an ear.

" Hallo ! " he said queerly. " That *is* the Austin. What the devil——" He plunged past to the garage.

Colin now heard it—a busy chug-chugging from inside the sealed doors. Recollection reared its head.

" That damned gearbox ! " He was out, tugging savagely at the doors.

Off the rollers ? They refused to budge. Or the man beside him was hindering. Those shaking hands. . . .

"Stand clear!" roared the inspector. He made a bull charge.

Back slid the doors. Colin fell through into stale gloom and perfect orderliness. No one visible.

The car, though. Small, vibrating like a live thing, it backed towards them—windows fast closed. Doors wrenched open now, all three men choking and gagging; someone's hand shutting off the inpouring fumes. Down low, where the matting had been freed, Colin saw them huddled together. There came a hysterical shriek.

"Both!" cackled Gregg. "Fitts said it might happen." He folded up like a jack-knife against the running-board. Something carromed from his pocket to clatter on the concrete floor, a short distance away.

Directly over the leakage hung the two heads, sun-gilded locks intermingled with dark, roughened curls. Wynn's arm in its green-brown sleeve lay heavily clamped round the other girl's shoulders—weighting them down. Two slack forms, coupled in death. Wynn Marchmont had accomplished her purpose. She had removed not only herself but the one damning eye-witness.

Alison—so staunch, so precious a life-partner. Gone. . . .

Now they lay on the harsh grey concrete, faces strangely akin in their ghastly pallor. Two good whiffs, both men knew, would have rendered them unconscious. The steady gush of carbon monoxide in their nostrils must minutes ago have finished the job. Fiercely, with dead hearts, Colin and the inspector set about their useless task of resuscitation. Outside, grey tissue of rain. From some shelter the whining of a dog . . .

"What's that?" Headcorn spun around.

The faint *cling* had come from within the building. Nothing whatever in the clean, dim space. Headcorn looked at the big, new Bentley drawn back in the opposite corner. For an instant a shadow had seemed to hover between it and the far wall. He lunged—and clutched emptiness. Whoever it was had eluded him.

And then . . .

"Hi!" shouted Reginald Hardmore, outside. "Elderson-Brown!"

In the open a fugitive scuttled for the gates. Through them sloshed a stable-lad, barring the way.

The trapped fox turned. There was a spurt of bright flame, the splintering of the Rover's windscreen. Lightning swift a second bullet struck the top of the wall, ploughing a blood-red furrow. But now an automatic spat viciously. New smoke-clouds swirled in the rain, fourteen stone of officialdom hurled on its snarling prey.

Handcuffs clicked. Red eyes glared into a ring of hot metal.

"And here," rasped the inspector, "ends a shrewd mug's game."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KINGSCLERE waited at the foot of the stairs. "Any hope?" he muttered with grey lips.

"A faint one." The inspector came slowly down.

The younger man moved to the table and poured two stiff pegs of whisky.

"Damned clever!" he gritted. "The swine would have taken the lot of us in."

"Quite likely. You hurried back, I suppose, to avert some such tragedy?"

Kingsclere looked surprised. "To have a shot at it, yes. It was Horrocks put me on, by telephone. I meant to get medical help. In case the poor girl had gone clean off her rocker, you know. I quite expected she had. Laying a false scent with that fire——"

"I see"—grimly. "Anything else Major Fitts was suggesting?"

"God, yes! He'd seen her pulling the tacks out of the floor-matting. That settled it. We all knew the condition of that gearbox. Now of course it's perfectly clear what did happen. Fitts loosened the matting himself. Laid a whole train of evidence, didn't he, to have ready in case it was wanted?"

"Just so. And he made Gregg an unconscious ally in his plans. Gregg, poor devil, never remotely suspected the real reason those girls had to be watched."

"It had to be Miss Young, too?"

"Obviously. What one found out the other was

bound to hear. They caught Fitts out in his rather unnecessary lie. His state of funk is shown by his trying then and there to burn them both in their beds. When that attempt failed he had to hunt other means of wiping them out in an equally misleading way if such a course was forced on him ; and he very nearly succeeded."

" About that chap Elderson-Brown," said Kingsclere hesitatingly. " I wasn't hedging, you know. If I seemed to be——"

" You needn't explain," answered the detective with an understanding grin. " Now I'm going to have a little talk with Gregg, if he's sufficiently recovered." He strode into the wet garden.

Alone, Kingsclere lit a gasper and puffed unsteadily. Fred Fitts, that addle-pated little ass ? The thing took some swallowing ; yet in the very paradox, it appeared, lay the almost incredible explanation . . .

In borrowed Wellingtons Headcorn stepped from Gregg's door and made his way to the weltering marsh near the brook.

" And now," asked the inspector gently, " what had you found out ? "

Alison glanced at her fellow victim, like herself shaky and white-faced in an arm-chair drawn close to a crackling wood fire. Wynn's eyes held seraphic peace. .She decided to speak for the two of them.

" Tom's snapshot." Her throat was horribly rasped. She clung more tightly to Colin's hand. " You've got it, I suppose ? "

" You mean this one of Fitts, taken beside his horse ? " Headcorn handed her the small print found in the prisoner's pocket.

"Of course. We didn't know, you see, that there'd been a film in Tom's camera. That Gregg, saying nothing except to the major, had taken it to be developed. I, as it happened, had shown rather too violent an interest in snapshots. Even so, I saw no reason why the major should notice. Will you pass me over that big album?"

She spread open the album and pointed to the picture of Derek standing alongside his horse.

"See? It's what I turned up directly I'd posted you my letter. Unluckily it was the only one of the kind I could dig up. I found pictures of mounted huntsmen, oh, plenty! But not measured like this in relation to the horse. Well, the whole point is that what I saw here and what I had in my mind didn't quite match. I wasn't sure, naturally. So I didn't dare breathe a word of this to Wynn for fear of raising a false hope."

Again she looked sideways, but Wynn still remained in her rapt dream. She continued:

"After I'd caught Gregg reading my letter I tried to fit him into my mental picture. It just wouldn't work. Why? Because"—triumphantly—"*he was the same height to an inch as Derek;* and what details could have carried over all that big stretch of country except height, colour and maybe general outline?"

"Well argued," approved the inspector. "And so——?"

"I hunted through every darned snapshot in the major's collection, still not finding what I wanted. Which is how I must have dropped my candy, though, I repeat, why should I suspect the major at all? No reason—none. It didn't even strike me as funny that since the day of that hunt I'd not once seen him with a horse. I know now he simply

didn't mean me to get a chance of comparing him with the man I believed I had seen. By the way, both the major's hunters are dark-brown—like Derek's. That's vital. You see why ? "

" Perfectly. Go on."

" Well, now for the new snapshot. They'd taken ages to develop it. It was due back any day, as the major knew, having inquired for it—and George Burt, bless him, let the cat nicely out of the bag. In popped the major, ready to snaffle the thing, knowing, of course, that the first glimpse of it would blow him to atoms ; only Wynn heard too, and managed some neat footwork. Outside the shop I saw this." She tapped the print which had so nearly cost her life. " It was enough. The truth just sky-rocketed into my brain."

" You mean this picture of Fitts corresponds with the one photographed on your memory ? "

" Corresponds ! Why, it *is* the man ! Look at those stiff angles. That's not Derek when he gets on to a horse ; but that's only the least bit of it. Here ! " She put her finger on the shiny surface. " That's where Derek's head comes above a horse's back. And here," jabbing down lower, " is where the major's head comes. Why, there's a good four inches difference ! In an empty landscape you want some object to measure by. There was only the hunter."

Colin pored over the two prints. " Fitts knew, of course. Yet you let him drive back with you ? "

" Well——" began Alison and stopped. " Wynn," she asked, " why didn't we dodge back into the shop and ring up from there ? "

" With the telephone on the counter ? " Wynn spoke with grim energy. " No fear ! I wasn't going to let him listen in and then give me the slip. If we

both behaved naturally he would go on feeling safe. Get home, shake him off, *then* do our telephoning. That was my idea."

"Mine, too," Alison nodded. "Supposing he did start any rough stuff, couldn't we have handled a little snipper like that? Easily. Oh, we weren't the least bit afraid, I assure you! I never once thought about the car."

"Nor I," said Wynn. "Hadn't I put more tacks in that matting just the day before? He watched me doing it—and came along later, I imagine, to pull them all out."

"I did feel woozy on the way back," admitted Alison. "I put it down to the state of mind I was in plus cigarette in that hermetically-closed space. And then . . ." To her infinite disgust she was trembling like a jelly.

"Leave that!" Colin gripped her hand hard.

"Bosh! I want to tell it. In the garage the major said he'd make a dash for umbrellas. Wynn said, 'Don't bother,' started to get out . . . and something like a ton of bricks landed on our two backs. Oh, we fought like young tigers! Only he was holding the rug round us, forcing us down. He'd switched on the engine again, the gas was churning right into our noses—and that's about all."

A shuddering silence. Wynn broke it to ask coolly, "Why are we alive?"

The inspector answered, "I think I've pieced it together now. I'll begin by saying that no one but Gregg heard the car drive in, and that he heard it only because he happened just then to be dodging about outdoors. The noise of the rain was pretty deafening, you know. All these windows had been closed, and Mr. Kingsclere didn't turn up till a moment or so later. Now we'll look at things from

Fitts's angle. While he was getting hold of the snapshots and arranging your bodies in the correct positions you had access to a certain amount of air. Next he was obliged to cut off the engine, owing to the fact that someone—a stable-lad it was—had come into the yard. The sound of the engine of course would have led to investigation and rescue. In other words, his job was interrupted. It meant the saving of your two lives and, incidentally, his own capture. You see, very soon after he'd got the gas going again our party broke in. He had barely time to take cover in the Bentley or behind it."

"Why didn't he lie low till you'd taken us away?"

"Ignorance, pure and simple. He saw his chance while the doctor and I were completely engrossed in trying to bring you back to life. How was he to know a fourth man was sitting outside in our car? The one man, it so happened, who could identify him as an impostor. Fitts ran bang into him. The game was up, though he might even then have managed a getaway. He'd picked up the revolver Gregg dropped out of his pocket and——"

"Then Gregg did take it!" cried Alison.

"Out of the office, yes. To prevent Miss Marchmont's using it on herself, maybe also on you. Gregg, I may tell you, is in a bad state of collapse."

"Gregg! Why was he so bent on this place being sold?"

"The answer lies, I think, in the man's whole defeatist attitude. For several years he seems to have lived in constant dread of a forced sale. He wanted quite honestly to save what could be saved of the Boldre fortune. I know now that he personally would not have been stranded. A kinsman in

Wiltshire had guaranteed him a post. As for Elderson-Brown——"

"Yes, how does he come into it? Or doesn't he at all?"

"In a sense, no. Yet—well, Elderson-Brown is the centre and hub of the whole thing."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"In judging this," began Headcorn, "think for a moment of the number of retired army-officers who fall victim to various shark investment schemes. It's news to none of you that for some time past, even up to his arrest, Frederick Fitts firmly and fatuously believed that oil in vast quantities was to be found on these acres. If his faith in that purely illusory assumption brought him to cold, deliberate murder——"

"You want us to think he's just plain nuts?" cut in Wynn sarcastically.

"It's less simple than that." Losing the thread, the inspector drew hard on his pipe. "He may, of course, have become in the one respect just a little unhinged."

Both girls had been told about the oil-dream. How it had come about was the mystery each had puzzled over once she had fought her way back to life through nausea, mental fog and the utterly washed-out weakness which still hadn't gone.

"In London last autumn," stated the inspector carefully, "Fitts had made the acquaintance of one James Elderson-Brown, an accredited expert on the locating of oil. Make no doubt of the man's reputation or of his ability to live up to it for twenty odd years. He was a very big person in his way, and this Fitts knew.

"Let's picture Frederick Fitts, newly home from Indian service and in possession of a comfortable little income, getting very chummy with the

acquaintance who, he soon hopes, will put him on to something good. And one day this happens, in a staggering way. Fitts lives at Sompton in Gloucestershire ? Good God ! Right there, within a quarter of a mile of him, is oil. Elderson-Brown, who had made the discovery on a single chance visit and gone back secretly to inspect the indications apparent only to the highly-trained eye, has been sitting tight on his knowledge. He means when free to profit by it. If he can't handle it alone, he may take in one or at most two partners. The fortune to be made mustn't be split among many."

"And the major fell for this yarn ?" demanded Alison incredulously.

"Why not ? Don't forget Elderson-Brown enjoyed the full trust and support of a heavily-capitalised firm. If he declared that the estate known as Chenerys contained a huge outcropping of what England cries out for to-day ; if he proposed to sink his last penny into buying this land and drilling holes in it . . . and well, it was enough to make any one sit up and take notice.

"Our retired major does more than take notice. Elderson-Brown can't by himself begin operations for several years. Fitts is on the spot, friendly enough with the present owner of the land to have a line on the latter's financial difficulties—*and* he has the wherewithal to buy the property outright and hold it. We may take it some working agreement is reached, that one partner buzzes off to Iraq or some such distant place while the other hurries home to begin cultivating the Chenerys' agent."

Alison interrupted. "You can't mean the major just drove ahead without ever bothering to get a second expert's opinion ?"

"He didn't dare risk that. Mightn't the mere breathing of the word oil wreck the whole plan? Let Boldre suspect and no power on earth would persuade him to sell, unless at an enormous price. Fitts is the dog with the bone, forced to gnaw his prize in solitude. Still, since he implicitly believes, that doesn't trouble him. He lives oil. He broods, he gloats on the one subject waking or sleeping. He reads up on oil-finding. He pokes about in the spots Elderson-Brown has particularly earmarked, notably along by the brook, where——"

"I know!" broke in Alison excitedly. "Horrible stuff I got all over my new shoes. It can't have been oil?"

"Sort of," murmured Wynn. "Down in those tall weeds."

"A patent remedy for mildew. A failure, and the container broke when it was being dumped in the stream. Gregg had all but forgotten it. The least knowledge should have told Fitts this mongrel substance was no leakage of crude petroleum, which——"

"Stop! Didn't his expert make the same howler?"

"That," declared the inspector irritatingly, "is quite another pair of shoes. I was going to put in a word about Frederick Fitts's mental equipment. It's largely compounded of ignorance, pig-headed conceit and the shrewdness so many low-grade minds possess. He had a magpie faculty, though, for hoarding what he hears, and at times he makes brilliant use of it. Instance, the anti-tetanus, its unique advantages for death-dealing.

"Naturally Fitts didn't want to commit murder. Hence the overtures to his friend Boldre on the subject of a sale. Terrified of seeming eager, he

made them jokingly, and in like spirit they were swept aside. Then the thought came to him, '*If the brother owned Chenerys, he would sell to me like a shot.*' Am I right," the inspector appealed to Wynn, "in assuming your fiancé gave this impression ? "

" Yes, if he ever inherited. A decidedly big if."

" Not to Fitts. He probably began carrying the stolen anti-tetanus about with him on every subsequent hunt, always hoping for the necessary conditions to administer a dose, only, as these conditions didn't occur he continued his bluff of hunting a larger property, and in March made one more attempt at purchasing Chenerys from Tom Boldre."

" One moment," said Colin. " Was Fitts keeping in touch with Elderson-Brown ? "

" If so, there's no document to prove it. What is certain is that Fitts never remotely conceived the true state of affairs, though it is possible he toyed with the idea of double-crossing Elderson-Brown and hogging the whole scheme for himself.

" Anyhow, about now he hoped that Boldre himself realised the danger of the mounting mortgages and that he might merely be looking for a chance to climb down. Fitts by this time was afraid to come into the open. If Boldre knew the friend he'd previously refused was still nagging at him, wouldn't he be annoyed, even suspicious ? So our schemer decided to let the offer come through a land agent sufficiently far afield, and to keep his own name out of it till success was assured.

" And now I will tell you why Fitts elected to pose as Elderson-Brown."

Silence, while the inspector prodded his pipe-stem with a pin. Gathering eyes he continued.

"Elderson-Brown was expected back during the spring. About the middle of March Fitts rang up British Developments Ltd., and learned that the engineer had not only arrived in England but was making a holiday tour somewhere in the west."

Wynn's brows went up. "Why pose as Elderson-Brown if the man himself was in the country?"

"Don't you see? It was *because* he was here. Otherwise Fitts wouldn't have risked it, in case the land agent inquired into credentials. That Elderson-Brown was not only in England but motoring hereabouts—probably heading for Yew Lodge and a business conference—made the imposture safe. The whole point being that the would-be purchaser had to be someone who once at least had seen Chenerys and been favourably struck by it, else, as a personal visit couldn't be made, even a simple mind like Boldre's well might smell a rat. It might still look a bit odd that the purchaser was content to buy with only a single and not very recent view to guide him, but Boldre if really anxious to do business would not let the other party's vagaries weigh against hard cash."

Alison put in, "Then, too, I expect the major still had Elderson-Brown's card he could present to this land agent."

"Quite!" Headcorn sent her an approving nod. "And beyond this it was only necessary to make a few alterations in his appearance, such as darkening his florid complexion with, shall we say, sun-tan lotion?—to imitate the other man's most noticeable feature; adding an inch or two to his height by putting pads in his shoes, and wearing smoked glasses. It was by accident only that the description given me by Hardmore should have suggested Edward Gregg.

"While the outcome of Fitts's gambit was still pending, an opportunity altogether too good to miss was handed him on a plate. In this lounge, after the hunt-ball——"

"Right!" said Wynn, her face hard. "If Tom had broken his neck then no single person could have been blamed. That is——"

"Just so, Miss Marchmont," said the inspector quietly, "and we know that your little indiscretion was duly registered to be used later on. Next day comes our historic hunt, and before that starts the Hardmore offer is finally turned down.

"Boldre's injured wrist made that day promising. Whether Fitts helped deliberately to cause the accident we may never discover; but certain it is Boldre did fall into the extreme rear, his friend Fitts contriving to be behind him. These requirements were essentials. And we must add a third: Boldre's being knocked unconscious, a bit of luck which came off. Once that happened, only speed was wanted. Quick as winking Fitts nipped off his horse, did his job with the needle and was out of sight while the huntsman presently to appear was still struggling through the wood. But in the big rush to get clear the syringe slipped its moorings, dropped to the ground, and wasn't missed till long after Glover, who had spied on the whole odd proceedings, had quietly picked it up!"

"Of course!" breathed Alison, thinking of the saddle-straps. "But what first put you on to it? On to anything, I mean?"

"A small item I've kept back. That same evening, after dark, Williams the farm lad saw the ray of an electric torch darting about that corner of the field. The natural conclusion was that one of the Boldres—it couldn't have been Dr. Ladbroke or you, because

I sounded you—had lost something and gone back to hunt for it. A night search looked peculiar. It led me to think that Mrs. Glover's suspicious behaviour indicated her husband had got his hands on some material and damaging evidence ; and this idea was confirmed by the raid on her house. Finding the actual syringe put the case on velvet. Or seemed to." The inspector again gave attention to his pipe.

"Why not?" said Wynn generously. "That woman fooled us all."

"For the simple reason that she herself was fooled. I imagine Glover was afraid to take her entirely into his confidence. He told her his hunch and his scheme, but withheld the identity of the man he proposed to blackmail in case inadvertently she gave something away to Fitts when she next ran into him. She therefore assumed that the man discovered with her landlord was the one who had given the injection, and planned to bleed him for the payments her husband had died in trying to obtain.

"Now for Glover. He might guess, but he could not be sure, not till events had proved the accuracy of his surmise. When in a little over the requisite fortnight his landlord died after another accident, a few deft inquiries told him all he needed to know. Major Fitts's motive did not concern him. Glover knew that Fitts had killed his friend as surely as though he had dug a knife into his heart. It was the moment to clamp down on him, and this Glover promptly proceeded to do."

"What a jolt!" Alison found she was relishing this portion. "Tell me this, though: Did the major from the first mean to have Derek suspected?"

"Certainly, for now he knew that the man he had thought amenable was proving every bit as unmanageable as the brother he'd removed, and by running this place on practical lines would probably have put the oil-development for ever beyond reach. The natural-death stunt couldn't be worked again. The simplest plan was to get Derek Boldre hanged, or else forced to sell through a combination of poverty after a ruinous legal defence and local boycott resulting from failure to be wholly cleared. The Glover murder had to be done on very short notice. Even so Fitts got the new landlord to his house while he was cleaning his revolver and hinted he wanted a parcel fetched from Bewkesbury. He rightly guessed that a man he had just offered a substantial loan without interest would not refuse a trifling courtesy.

"Derek, of course, was already the ideal scapegoat, provided the truth about his brother's death was permitted to leak out as Fitts now intended it should do. Drop a hint to the chief constable. Make him see the advisability of getting in outside help. It might be necessary to let a bit more information fall into the Yard detective's ears. All he had to do now was a little back-seat driving—at which he was particularly good."

"And," remarked Alison dryly, "it was only what we expected of him. Was Arthur Kingsclere's call also arranged?"

"That was unforeseen. There was no harm in letting it muddy the waters for a time, seeing that ultimately suspicion was bound to centre on Derek Boldre. The snag, of course, was the syringe which Glover failed to hand over."

"That's how it happened, is it?" said Colin, interested. "I've been wondering."

" Oh, yes ! Glover wanted to keep Fitts under his thumb and get more money out of him. And here is where Fitts went wild, shot his tormentor dead, and only then perceived his mistake. He had got somehow to get possession of that syringe. Fitts stole into the farmhouse at night, stunned Mrs. Glover, but could not locate it. Do you know why early next morning he revisited the scene ? To see if Mrs. Glover had the least glimmer as to who had attacked her. She hadn't ; so again all was well. And, more luck for him, that same night Derek Boldre had been seen prowling past Boxtree Farm. Any detail I'm leaving out ? "

" Well," said Colin, " since the real motive was buried completely out of sight, what first made you include Fitts in the running ? "

" Let me see . . . oh, yes. Just a sheet of blank paper."

" Blank ! But how——"

" You know the letter Gregg offered to show me but couldn't find ? Well, I puzzled over it a little. I wondered if its vanishing hinged on the explanatory detail it contained concerning Elderson-Brown and his visit to Chenerys.

" Suddenly there popped into my mind a sheet of business paper I had noticed in Major Fitts's table-drawer. I had caught only a brief glimpse of the engraved heading and that from the reverse side ; but the lettering showed through, and the general lay-out looked identical with the heading on Reginald Hardmore's paper. Suppose this paper had been taken with some idea of typing a letter on it ? Though the theory led nowhere it allowed me to speculate. If Fitts had stolen and destroyed the first of the Hardmore letters the fact would be impossible to prove. I could, however, make sure

the blank sheet was what I had believed it to be. Two evenings ago I pried into the major's drawer, and——"

"The paper was the same?" cried the three voices at once.

"Gone!" The inspector made a dramatic pause. "Not a sign of it anywhere in the house. Gone also a book on oil-finding which had been lying on top of it, and ditto another treatise on the same subject I had noticed by the bedside. Three things missing. There might be nothing in it, but I began to ask if my search had been anticipated."

Briefly the inspector outlined his excursion to Shrewsbury and what had come of it. At the end two of his listeners poised on the edge of their seats.

"Elderson-Brown!" whispered Alison, eyes snapping. "So *he* was the loony one!"

"Exactly. And there in one word you have the answer to Fitts's delusion. Oh, I've had a peep at the man! He's in a private retreat undergoing treatment for what is given out as a simple nervous breakdown from overwork. Having forced the hand of his physician I can now explain why his mental condition is being so jealously concealed and at the expense of his firm. The British Development Company is scared blue lest its shareholders know that recent decisions have rested on the word of an unsuspected madman."

"Unsuspected! But how——"

"Because, as Dr. Ladbroke will tell you, this form of insanity sometimes runs a longish course before a real smash-up occurs and the patient has to be put under restraint. During that period its only outward symptoms may be glittering imaginative flights—often most plausible-sounding—and extra-

vagance which at the finish becomes fantastic. In this case the head-office was hampered by its rare contacts with its employee. There was a fever-attack to account for one or two wild letters; and even when the man himself turned up his manner suggested only that he was in a strung-up condition. It was these reports coming in from Bath and other places that began spilling the beans. If the company didn't know, can you wonder that Fitts, off here in the country, hadn't an inkling?"

"I see now," said Alison, "why you thought the engineer himself had been making that crazy bid for this place."

"Yes. He was in the west counties on the right dates. He'd done madder things than trying to buy property he couldn't pay for. That he happened to be an expert on oil did not mean he had any criminal connection with any one here; and both murders must have been committed by an individual on the spot.

"Now for your letter, Miss Young. Memory is very tricky, especially when it's snarled up by emotion, as it was bound to be with you. I meant to question you again and see if there could be some significant item tucked away in your mind. I had little hope that there was; but then in the train Dr. Ladbroke gave me some rather disturbing news. It might be true your hostess was contemplating self-destruction. On the other hand there was a just-conceivable alternative: *that someone here was getting badly alarmed.* If so, then the suicide-suggestion was a plant to cover a death or deaths which might have to occur. The star witness for the Crown was feeling shaky over her evidence. If all of a sudden some light flashed on her——"

Headcorn did not finish. The big dim lounge grew silent.

"Two snapshots," croaked Alison, hand straying to her throat. "A sheet of blank paper . . ."

There'd been a better clue, of course. Small doubt now as to how that last shred of white cotton had attached itself to the detective's own sleeve. The murderer had used a clothes-brush with great thoroughness before he bustled along to the Glover farm; but bits of fibre fly about, clinging where they light, and one of these he must not only have carried with him but transferred, all unconsciously, to Headcorn's own person. . . .

"Time's up," ordered Colin briskly. "Now, you two crocks, into your beds!"

Wynn did not stir. She had lain back amongst her cushions, eyes trained on the door.

"Let her be," muttered the doctor, and so in the shadows they left her.

When the footsteps had died away Wynn toiled out of the house, reached the big gates and leant breathless against a pillar. Under the chestnuts a million blossoms made a sodden carpet. Puddles remained from the storm and broken boughs had been swept into piles. A cuckoo called and went on calling, the notes cool and clear as spring water. The evening was heavenly sweet. In the west hung the Great Star.

Arthur's car was just stopping. She heard Derek say,

"Thanks, you might set me down here."

Two strides into the gateway. A start at the wraith uprisen in his path. Arms round her, voice hoarser than hers.

"Wynn! Here, look at me! Are you all right?"

"Nonsense! What's all the fuss?"

It was the old Wynn, making light of his fears. A spurt only, for now she had wilted, rough curls pressed deep in his shoulder.

"Oh," she choked, "just hold me. *Tight* . . ."

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